

SUCCESSFUL NOVELS

BY

FRED M. WHITE

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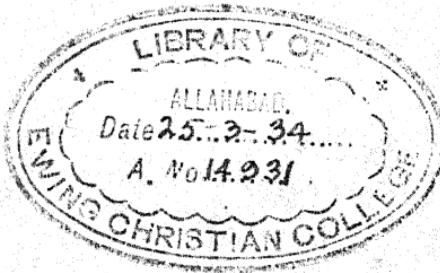
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- THE SCALES OF JUSTICE
- THE OPEN DOOR
- THE CORNER HOUSE

A CLUE IN WAX

BY
FRED M. WHITE



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1920

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To

A. E. MANNING FOSTER

FOR HIS MANY COURTESIES AND THE GERM
IDEA FROM WHICH THIS STORY GREW

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A CLUE IN WAX

CHAPTER I

CLIFFORD CHERITON emerged from the bathroom into his modest sitting-room in a blithesome frame of mind. For it was one of those perfect April mornings of which the poet Browning speaks so feelingly and which seldom comes in what is traditionally a month of tender greenery and sunshine. But here was an afternoon—because it was afternoon—full of flickering lights and shadows, and even in the dingy square outside the prim house in Bennett Street the lilacs were in full bloom and here and there a laburnum about to burgeon into its yellow chains. An afternoon for youth and happiness and everything that goes to make life a joy even in a drab London street.

In the tiny sitting-room Cheriton's landlady had placed his breakfast on a table near the window so that he could command some sort of view of the outside world, and to his bacon and eggs the occupant sat down with the healthy appetite of an athlete and a man who has little or nothing on his conscience. There were sport-

ing prints on the wall, a hanging bookcase containing some five hundred volumes, ranging from Anatole France's *Revolt of the Angels* to Manning Foster's latest manual on the subject of auction bridge. So that it will be seen what a Catholic taste in literature Cheriton possessed. In one corner of the room was a bag of golf clubs and, on the mantelshelf, a rather elaborate silver clock bearing an inscription to the effect that the owner had won it in the open mile of the Lanchester school sports, fifteen years before. Which, in itself, was a proof that here was one who had made his mark in one of the finest scholastic institutions in the country. And, to complete the whole thing, on a peg behind the door was a policeman's helmet and a blue tunic with three stripes on the arm from which the intelligent observer would have judged that Cheriton was connected with the Police Force.

The intelligent observer aforesaid would have guessed right, because Clifford was a sergeant in the special reserve and had won that position after three years' service with the Metropolitan Force. Not an unusual thing to happen in these hard times, when a public school career counts for little in the battle of life, and many a youth who had set out a few years before with lofty ambitions had come to regard himself as fortunate to occupy the front seat in a taxi-cab. And this, in a measure, had been Clifford's career up to now. Just a sergeant of police, connected

with the Criminal Investigation Department, and the hope that some day he might rise to Inspector's rank.

But it had been a hard row to hoe. A whole year in the humblest capacity possible for an officer of the law; then, by fortunate chance, the best part of another year chasing a fugitive from justice across the American continent, followed by an extradition case that lasted for months. Yet, on the whole, his time had not been wasted because it was all experience, and it was going to help him later on as one of his superiors had told him only a few days before.

Time was when Cheriton had had ambitions towards literature. That, indeed, had been the line he had cut out for himself when he left school and one he had pursued until it had ended in a blind alley and something like starvation. Criminology was the subject that most fascinated him, and this it was that had impelled him to the writing of a novel, which had for a basis the study of an original criminal and the psychology that goes with the type of law-breaker who sets out deliberately to prey on society, much in the same spirit as some men regard adventures in unexplored portions of the globe. There had been one or two short stories of Clifford's published in the magazines and a rather longer effort which had won the approval of the literary agent in whose hands he had placed his work. But whilst the grass grows

the steed starves, and there had come one bitter moment when the would-be author had to decide between a potential literary career and something in the nature of starvation. By this time he had nearly completed his novel which was in type, so that he had to throw it aside for some months and only work at it at odd times when he was off duty. And in this work he had been encouraged by the girl who had done his typing for him at a price that had barely paid for the paper on which it was written and who now, in some way or another, seemed to have slipped out of his life.

Anyhow, the story was finished and, for the last eight or nine months, had been in the hands of Messrs. Amber and Lawrence, the famous literary agents in Whitefriars Street. They had succeeded in finding a publisher for the book and had also arranged for its simultaneous appearance on the other side of the Atlantic. And there, for the moment, the matter rested.

"Of course, we shall be glad to see anything else you like to send us in the meantime," Lawrence had told Cheriton. "I don't suppose we shall hear anything about the book for months—perhaps not for a year. You see, the publishers are not under contract to supply an account for nine months after the book appears, and it will be difficult to tell whether it is a success or not until they communicate with us. Let us have what you can, my boy—forget all

about your novel. When there is anything to report, I will write to you."

And so Cheriton had gone on with his work, trying to convince himself that there was an end of his literary career. Anyway, there was no time now to think even about short stories. But there were optimistic moments when he indulged in day-dreams of future glory, and in these dreams he could see the eager blue eyes and wistful beauty of Evelyn Marchand, the girl who had taken so keen an interest in the book when she was acting in a small capacity as Cheriton's secretary.

What had become of her, he wondered. He had tried to trace her again on his return from America and get her to go on with the work in which she had proved so fine an inspiration. But she had vanished, leaving no trace behind. She was little more than a girl, working hard to keep herself and a widowed mother by means of a typewriter, and making but a poor success of it. A pretty girl, more than a pretty girl, with a delicacy of feature and a natural refinement that told Cheriton plainly enough a story. The story of a girl well-bred and born and fighting bravely against adversity and misfortune. There was something in the perfect spring afternoon that brought that dainty face and charming smile back vividly to Clifford's recollection.

He put this out of his mind for the moment as he ate his breakfast, which was a belated

meal, seeing that he had come off night duty at four o'clock that morning, and was free now, not only for the rest of the day, but for tomorrow as well, it being his monthly day off. Then, when he had despatched his eggs and bacon and lighted a cigarette, he took from the mantelpiece a letter which had arrived by that morning's post. Without any premonition of events, he carelessly tore open the envelope and found that it was a short note from his agents, Amber and Lawrence, from whom he had not heard for months. It was a mere request that, whenever the recipient had half an hour to spare, the people in Whitefriars Street would be glad to see him on a matter of considerable personal importance.

Forty minutes later, Clifford was seated in the luxurious office of the junior partner and regarding with somewhat envious eyes a series of black deed boxes with white lettering which were ranged all along one wall of the room. And on these white letterings were the names of men who were household words wherever the English language is spoken. Great novelists, most of them, and Cheriton wondered, half whimsically, if ever his own name would appear in that glittering constellation.

"Ah, sit down, Cheriton," Lawrence said. "Help yourself to a cigarette. I dare say you were beginning to wonder if you were ever going to hear from us again."

The speaker was a tall, spare man with a slightly greying moustache and a monocle in his left eye. A keen, shrewd individual whose mouth betrayed a sense of humour.

"Oh, I don't know," Clifford said modestly. "You warned me that it might be months and, besides, I have been pretty busy in other directions. And it doesn't matter much whether the book turns out a success or not. You see, I am a sergeant now, with a promise of promotion, and I have one or two friends at court who will help me as long as I help myself."

"Yes, I quite appreciate that," Lawrence smiled. "I must say you don't look much like a policeman."

Clifford smiled in his turn. In his suit of pearl-grey tweed, beautifully polished brown shoes, and old Lanchester tie, he was about the last individual in the world to be taken by the man in the street for a mere policeman.

"However, let us get to business," Lawrence went on. "I heard from Gardiner and May the day before yesterday with a first account of the sales of your book. And, by a curious coincidence this morning, we heard also from our New York office with a report of the sales on the other side. My dear young man, do you realize that you are about to become famous?"

"It hadn't struck me," Clifford said dryly.

"Well, you are. I dare say if you had read the papers you would have observed what

favourable notices your book received on this side. Don't you ever look at the papers?"

"Very seldom. Just to scan my favourite news sheet and that is about all. I don't agree with Gilbert that a policeman's life is not a happy one, but it's dashed hard work and doesn't leave much leisure for recreation."

"No, I suppose not. Now, see here. Up to the time this account was made up, your book had sold five thousand copies on this side, which means that the publishers have sent us a cheque for just over £250. That you can have, less our commission, and take it away with you if you like."

"You don't mean that?" Clifford gasped.

"Indeed I do. And, what is more, the book is selling rapidly. I shouldn't be at all surprised if you don't make £1,000 out of what is called the library edition. And that is only one side of the matter. Now, I read your book before I sent a typed copy to America and I was sanguine that the American scenes in it which were the result of your experience over there, would attract a good deal of attention. As a matter of fact, they have. Up to the present moment, over nineteen thousand copies of the book have been sold in the United States and that means over £1,500 for you. At least the cheque speaks for itself."

Cheriton gazed with open-mouthed astonishment at the speaker.

"Oh, I assure you I am not joking," Lawrence

laughed. "That story of yours is going to be one of the best sellers in America. When the Americans once take up a thing, they don't let it go. Now, what do you say to an offer for three novels on a 15 per cent. basis with £1,000 each for the serial rights and, in addition, a series of six short stories, annually, at £150 a story."

"Good Lord," Clifford gasped. "Do the Americans pay like that? Wonderful!"

With a sweep of his hand, Lawrence indicated the white-lettered boxes on the wall.

"Look at those names," he said. "Known all over the world. Celebrities, every man jack of them. Making incomes that a Cabinet Minister would envy. But not on this side, my boy, not on this side. The big money comes from the States. And that is where yours is coming from in future. Don't make up your mind in a hurry. You have a career before you, apart from writing, which may easily become a distinguished one. On the other hand, you should be able to make four or five thousand a year for a long time to come by your pen. It doesn't matter if you don't earn a penny in England; you are going to get it in the States. You will leave here presently with the best part of £2,000 in your pocket, and if you like to sign the contract, the draft of which our New York agent has sent us, then there is £1,500 a year certain for the next three years. But, as I said before, don't decide in a hurry. Come back in

a few days and let us know your decision. Personally—but never mind that."

"I have decided now," Clifford said crisply. "I am quite keen on my present work, but my heart has been with pen and ink ever since I left school. And I am sure, without boasting, that I can do better than I have already done. Of course, I have had no time to write, but on lonely night duty I have had plenty of time to think and I have dozens of ideas pigeon-holed for both long and short stories. If you don't mind, I should be glad if you would put this matter through for me and, when those contracts are ready for signature, I will come along and sign them."

"Ah, that is just what I expected you to say," Lawrence smiled. "And I think you are right. Mind you, I am not saying that I am altogether disinterested, because we are always on the look-out for new clients. Do you know, that book of yours interests me for more reasons than one. The psychological study of your criminal is most fascinating. It strikes quite a new note. And thereby, in a way, hangs a tale. A lady client of ours sent us a long-short story a few weeks ago which, she writes, was written from notes she made a year or two back. The treatment was so like yours that both my partner and myself were struck at once by the similarity. It was just as if you had been talking over your story with her and inspiring her. Don't mis-

understand me ; there is no suggestion of plagiarism, but it is just as if you had discussed your story at length with her and she had founded hers on a new angle you had discovered."

Clifford looked up swiftly.

" Is that really so ? " he asked. " Of course, I don't want to be personal and I don't want to ask any impertinent questions, but I wonder if you would tell me the name of the lady in question. That is, of course, if you think you can place her story and she is going to publish it under her own name. If she is using a *nom de plume*, then please forget that I asked the question. I have a good reason for asking it."

" Oh, I think we shall place the story easily enough," Lawrence said. " The lady sent it to us in her own name and there was no suggestion in her letter that she wanted to hide herself behind a *nom de plume*. I asked her to come and see us, because I think we can do quite a lot with her."

" And the name ? " Clifford asked rather breathlessly.

" The name is Evelyn Marchand."

" Strange, most strange," Clifford murmured. " Before my work was interrupted and I had to go to America, a Miss Evelyn Marchand did my typing. I dictated most of the story to her and she came to my lodgings for the purpose. I —"

" Would like to meet her again," Lawrence smiled.

CHAPTER II

BEFORE Clifford could reply, a clerk came into the room and laid a visiting card on his employer's table. Then he vanished as quietly as he came.

"Now, there is a strange thing," Lawrence said. "This is Miss Marchand's card. She has evidently called to see me on business, and if you like to hang about in the waiting-room for a bit, I will tell her that you are here."

Clifford rose immediately, and for the next quarter of an hour was cooling his heels in the waiting-room. Then the door opened and Evelyn Marchand came in.

The same Evelyn Marchand he had known two years before and yet not the same. The same almost spiritual beauty, the pleading eyes of clearest blue, the sunny, rather wistful, smile and the crown of auburn hair. But no longer the timid child in a cheap, home-made frock, but one who had suddenly become accustomed to that definite luxury of surrounding which spells prosperity. She was dressed almost as simply as ever, but it was the simplicity of art, allied to that Parisian exclusiveness of cut and texture which every daughter of Eve would

recognize at a glance, and which merely fascinates man and puzzles him.. But directly the girl opened her mouth and held out her hand, Clifford knew that there was no change here.

"Oh, Clifford, this is delightful," she said with that charming naturalness of hers. "I had wondered what on earth had become of you. You disappeared in the most extraordinary way. Just in the middle of a chapter of your book. And never a word to me, except that you were leaving England on business. And I have been wondering ever since if I did anything to offend you."

"Offend me," Clifford cried. "My dear girl, you couldn't possibly do it. I couldn't tell you where I was going, because it was police business and my lips were sealed. When I went away I thought it would be for a month, instead of which I was on the other side of the Atlantic for nearly a year. But why this amazing change? You are not going to tell me that you made that powder-blue frock, simple as it looks."

Evelyn laughed joyously.

"You can't deceive a policeman," she said. "But I might ask you the same question. You would hardly call yourself in plain clothes, would you? You are not going to tell me that the suit you are wearing came from anywhere but Bond Street."

"Savile Row, as a matter of fact," Clifford smiled. "My one extravagance. I bought my-

self a spring and autumn suit on the strength of being made a sergeant, and my old tailors let me have it practically at cost price. But what about yourself? You are not—er—well, not exactly——”

“ Married,” Evelyn said roguishly. “ Oh no.”

“ Going to be, perhaps,” Clifford said, greatly daring.

“ Not even that, you impudent person. At least, I—I don’t think so. But it is quite a romance. Many months ago I happened to see an advertisement in *The Times* asking for information as to any family called Marchand. It was only by a bit of sheer luck that I saw it whilst I was waiting in a house in Grosvenor Square in connection with some of my typing. Now, as you know, Marchand spelt with a ‘c’ is a very uncommon name, and I am under the impression that my mother and myself are the only two people in the country who can claim that name. I don’t think I should have worried about it, only my mother insisted. So I went to the address of a firm of solicitors in Lincoln’s Inn Fields with all the evidence I could collect and, after a few days, I heard from those lawyers that their client was the Earl of Seagrane, who is absolutely the last of his line. They told me he was a rich old gentleman, living in an ancestral seat called Seagrane Holt, which is on the South Kent coast, and that as he had no heirs and no one to succeed him, he was anxious to

trace anyone bearing the family name of Marchand, with a view of—well, adopting them. So when all the preliminaries were over, my mother and I went down to Seagrane Holt and—well—there we have been ever since. Isn't it a romantic story?"

"Wonderful," Clifford cried. "I am not going to ask you if you are happy, because you have happiness written all over you."

"Oh, you couldn't help being happy at Seagrane Holt," Evelyn said. "It is such a glorious old place, with old family servants and everything just as you read it in Peacock's stories. And then he is such a dear, kind old man. His life is a romance. He was very wild in his youth, and when really a boy, ran away to sea and was lost sight of for over fifty years. He became a caddie on some American golf links, and when the late Earl died and he was advertised for, he was working in the professional's shop making clubs. Of course, he never expected to come into the title, as when he left England there were half a dozen people between him and the earldom. However, he did come back when he was obliged to, and, because he was so lonely and so out of things in England, he advertised for relatives. And he says mother is a godsend because she is such a splendid chatelaine. She seemed to take to managing that great household in the most natural way. But the Earl is quite a character in his way and

he hates anything like ceremonial or fuss. So long as the house is run properly and he gets his golf, which he plays regularly at Sandchester——”

“Ah, Sandchester,” Cheriton replied—or, rather, interrupted with a half-sigh. “What happy recollections that name conjures up. I used to go down there with my father every summer before the crash came, and those days I shall never forget. Do you know, Eve, I have always promised myself a week-end cottage at Sandchester if ever I was fortunate enough to attain such a luxury. There was a thatched house there, on the high ground beyond the golf links looking out over the sea, with woods behind and—— Oh, well, you know the sort of thing I mean.”

“Of course I do,” Evelyn said. “Why, the park at Seagrane Holt runs right down to it. Isn’t the place you mean just behind the seventh hole?”

“That is the spot,” Clifford cried almost excitedly. “But perhaps it has been pulled down by now.”

“Indeed it hasn’t,” Evelyn said. “It is used as a kind of store room for odds and ends. It is part of Lord Seagrane’s property. I know it very well.”

“Now, this is almost like a fairy story,” Clifford smiled. “Do you think his lordship would let it to me on lease? I would put it in

repair and see that it was no disgrace to the property. Do you think it could be managed?"

"I am quite sure it could. I have only to ask anything in reason, and Lord Seagrane will be only too delighted to meet my wishes. He really is the dearest old man. Not the popular conception of a great nobleman, because, you see, he had practically no education and, for the most part, his life in America was a very hard one. But the kindest-hearted man. But what is all this talk about? Are you telling me that you have suddenly come into a fortune or something of that sort?"

"Upon my word, Eve, you are not far wrong," Clifford laughed excitedly. "Let me tell you all about it."

In a few words, he outlined the extraordinary events of the last hour. How something like fame had come to him out of the blue and how, all at once, he had blossomed from a mere policeman into something very like a celebrity.

"Wonderful, isn't it," he concluded. "This morning I hadn't a five-pound note to bless myself with and now I am in possession of nearly £2,000 and the promise of a good deal more than that, annually. So I am going to give up being a detective and devote myself to literature in future. But what a remarkable thing it is that I should find you here just when Lawrence was telling me of my amazing luck. By the way, he told me something more than that.

He was saying just now that you had also written a promising story something on the same lines of my type of work. And then I informed him that you used to act as a sort of secretary to me. And, almost before I had finished telling him, a clerk brought in your card. There is a fate in this. But then I always knew that we should meet again some day. But, tell me, how was it you happened to be up in town ? ”

“ Well, I came up to do some shopping, and also to execute a commission that Lord Seagrane gave me. So I thought that I would call on Mr. Lawrence to see what he thought of my story.”

“ You are going back this afternoon ? ”

“ Oh no,” Evelyn said. “ Not till to-morrow, anyway. I am on my own after six o’clock and I am staying the night at a private hotel in Mount Street.”

“ Splendid ! ” Clifford cried. “ In that case, you are going to dine with me and perhaps we can do a show afterwards. Something wildly extravagant in the way of a dinner to celebrate the occasion. I believe that I have a respectable dress suit somewhere or another, and if I can’t find it, then I will hire one. But perhaps you have some other engagement.”

Evelyn responded to the effect that the evening was entirely at her disposal and that she had not been looking forward to it with any great amount of pleasure.

"I was thinking of hunting up an old friend of mine who is secretary to a City merchant," she said. "But we need not worry any more about that."

"We won't," Clifford said promptly. "Now, look here, you have some work to do and so have I. If you give me your address I will call for you at seven o'clock and, meanwhile, I will engage a table at the Clarendon. I have not been inside that place for five years, though I believe the old head waiter is still there and will be glad to see me for my father's sake."

On this understanding they parted and, shortly afterwards, Clifford returned to his lodgings with Lawrence's cheque in his pocket. That he would pay into the bank the following morning and, meanwhile, he had in ready money the necessary funds for the evening's entertainment. His first business was to look up the dress suit he had not worn time out of mind, to discover that it had not suffered, though perhaps not quite so up-to-date as he would have liked. A hurried visit to a neighbouring tailor and the application of a skilfully used hot iron worked wonders, so that, later on, it was quite an immaculate young man who set out on foot to pick up his companion in Mount Street.

He had a good deal to think about as he walked along. His own future for one thing—a future so bright and glowing that he almost trembled when he thought of it. As if by the

lifting of a fairy's wand, he had been raised almost miraculously from a lowly position in the Police Force to something that was very nearly akin to fame. At any rate, he could see before him now the prospect of a splendid income for many years to come and the knowledge that he was his own master, to work when he liked, and turn his intelligence to that class of literature to which he felt himself to be best fitted.

And Evelyn. What a beautiful girl she had grown into! She had always been pretty and attractive with a certain appeal of her own which had stirred Clifford profoundly. He was beginning to realize now, with something almost like a shock, that he had always cared for Evelyn Marchand, though he had never, by word or sign, shown her in what direction his feelings lay. It would have been selfishness personified to have done so. As a mere humble member of the police with no prospect before him, it would have been almost cruel on his part to have made any attempt to engage the affections of a girl who had come to him, in the first instance, as a mere matter of business.

But now everything was changed. For Evelyn was no longer a child struggling to make money enough to keep herself and her mother from starvation, but a lovely girl on whom prosperity and happiness had acted entirely for the best.

So Cheriton walked along the West End streets

with his head high in the air and a feeling in his heart that he had the whole world at his feet. He did not even care to consider the possibility that the Earl of Seagrane might have had other views for his attractive young relative. It was pleasant to know that the present head of the Seagranes was no haughty aristocrat, but a man who had had to struggle hard in a harder world and was, therefore, devoid of the shibboleths of the class to which he had been born. Sooner or later, he would have to meet this old man and—oh, well, the future could take care of itself.

Here was Evelyn awaiting him, a dainty vision in sea-green with shoes and stockings to match. A perfect figure of budding English womanhood, with a smile on her lips and a look in those glorious blue eyes of hers that set Clifford tingling from head to foot. It was as if fortune was showering all her gifts upon him at once and the knowledge had gone to his head.

"Splendid!" he said. "I suppose the right thing to do is to compliment you on your frock, isn't it? I have been so long a lonely policeman that I have forgotten all the little amenities. But you look stunning."

"That is very nice of you," Evelyn smiled. "All the more so because I believe you mean every word you say."

"And a good deal more than that," Clifford said emphatically. "Now, let me call a taxi."

"The extravagance of it!" Evelyn mocked.
"On a lovely night like this I should much prefer to walk. Wait a minute till I get a wrap."

She vanished, to reappear again almost immediately, and together they walked down the street, with Evelyn happy and gay and not realizing exactly what a proud and happy man it was who strode along by her side. Nor did she seem to be in the least conscious of the attention she was attracting as she walked across the floor of the Clarendon grill-room to the table at the far end, which Clifford had engaged an hour before. It was that beautiful unconsciousness of hers and the sweet serenity with which she surveyed the room which was not the least of her charms.

It was the head waiter himself who piloted them to their table laid out for two and saw that they had every attention.

"Capital chap, that," Clifford said when the coffee and liqueur stage was reached. "It is extraordinary what memories these head waiters have. That man recognized me directly I came in, though I have not been inside these walls for five years. He remembered my father and told me how honoured he was to have the opportunity of waiting on a Cheriton once more. He seemed to be under the impression I had been abroad all this time. But I don't doubt for a moment that he knows all about the family misfortunes, to say nothing of the fact that I

am a mere policeman. All very soothing to my vanity."

"All very pleasant, I am sure," Evelyn said. "Do you know, I have never dined in a place like this before. I felt horribly frightened when I came in and wondered if I should do anything that was not quite right and proper. You see, this is practically my first visit to London since we went down to Seagrane Holt. It is all very wonderful and fascinating, and some of those women's dresses are marvellous. Gives me a sort of Arabian Nights feeling. I could sit here watching for hours."

"Well, let's," Clifford suggested. "Unless you would like to go on to a music hall or something of that sort."

"Oh no, Clifford, I am quite satisfied as I am, to sit here and watch these people coming and going. It gives me the feeling that I am in the great world at last. Mind you, I wouldn't change Seagrane Holt for anything that London had to offer me."

"As ideal as all that," Clifford smiled. "Then you don't find it dull down there occasionally?"

"Dull, my dear boy, how ridiculous! That lovely old house, filled with all sorts of wonderful treasures. Pictures and tapestries and furniture almost priceless. Then the gardens and the lawns and the wonderful trees! The late Lord Seagrane would have had to sell

it if he had lived much longer. It was quite a mercy in its way that my dear old benefactor happens to be an exceedingly rich man."

"Oh, is he? How does that come about? I understood you to say that he worked on some American golf links."

"Yes, that is true enough," Evelyn explained. "But every now and then, he got the wanderer's fever and went off exploring. Alaska and the Yukon and all that kind of thing. Then he would come back again, sure of his old job because he was a fine workman, to settle down for a year or two and then off again. And, eventually, he became really rich. As far as I can gather, there was a trip he took with an Englishman named Canton and they found a copper mine. Canton hadn't any money, but plenty of friends in the City and they financed the scheme. Just before the late Earl died, his successor realized all he had made out of that last desperate adventure and was prepared to spend the rest of his days in America, when he came into the title and estates and came home, very much against the grain. His partner died in the meantime and, by some means or another that I have never had properly explained, contrived to lose all his money. He had a son called Andrew Canton who had not long come down from Oxford and had nearly qualified for the Bar, and it was characteristic of the dear old man that he should seek out

Andrew Canton and induce the latter to come and live at Seagrane Holt."

Clifford was conscious of a certain uneasiness which he would have found it hard to account for.

"And what is the young man like?" he said.

"Oh, presentable enough—quite the finished product of Oxford. A good sportsman, but a little rash and impetuous and, I fancy, a born gambler. Not that it matters much because, some day or another, he will be master of Seagrane Holt and a huge fortune which will necessarily be attached to it."

Without quite knowing why, Clifford was not displeased to hear this.

"Oh, then you are not going to be the nursery story type of heiress?" he asked.

"Oh dear, no," Evelyn said emphatically. "Lord Seagrane made that quite clear when we first went to Seagrane Holt. He told my mother and myself that he was under the deepest obligation to Andrew Canton's late father and that, in any case, most of what he had would go to the young man in question. Perhaps I am wrong, but I feel a sort of conviction that there was a sort of tragedy behind that statement, because the Earl spoke so strangely about it. He was communicative and yet, at the same time, reticent and I seemed to see in his expression a shadow of shame. Of course, it might be my fancy, but I can't shake off the

impression. Still, it has nothing whatever to do with me and I am thankful to know that my mother and myself will be well provided for."

"That is good hearing, at any rate," Clifford said thoughtfully. "I suppose, to round off the story properly, you and this young man Canton ought to fall in love with one another and receive the old man's blessing with the assurance that now he can die happy. You know the sort of tale I mean."

As he spoke, Cheriton saw the flush on Evelyn's cheek and a certain unsteadiness about her lips. Then she laughed, but the laughter did not seem to ring exactly true.

"That would be a fitting ending, wouldn't it?" she almost challenged. "But don't you think we are looking a little far ahead? However, you will be able to judge for yourself when you come down to Seagrane Holt. When I get back there to-morrow, I shall tell the Earl all that has happened and how I met a valued friend who badly wants to rent a cottage close to Sandchester Golf Links. Do you know what will happen when I tell the old gentleman that?"

"How should I?" Clifford asked.

"Well, he will tell me to write you a letter asking you to come down and stay there for a bit. The mere fact of your being a friend of mine will prompt him to suggest that at once. And when he hears that you are a golfer, he will

welcome you with open arms. And if you want that cottage, I am sure you can have it."

They sat there talking happily for the best part of an hour until Evelyn rose and expressed a desire to leave.

"Why the hurry?" Clifford asked. "And why are you looking across at that table in the opposite corner?"

"Did you notice that?" Evelyn asked. "You see those men there? I am sure they are talking about us. The eyes of the taller of the two make me feel quite uncomfortable. Very silly, of course, but—"

CHAPTER III

AS Clifford and his companion left the restaurant a pair of bold eyes followed Evelyn's retreating figure with a mixture of boldness and malignant intensity that would have caused Clifford's blood to rise if he had only seen it. Then the door closed behind them, and the tall man with the magnetic eyes turned to his companion.

"That is the girl," he said. "I spotted her when I was down at Sandchester last week. Funny that I should have run up against her here to-night. I wonder who her companion was."

"Oh," the other man said. "That chap Canton, I suppose."

"Oh dear, no. Canton is a different type altogether. I saw him on Sandchester Links, too. He is fair, with grey eyes and yellowish hair that curls a bit. You saw Miss Marchand's friend was dark and I should say a real he-man by the look of him. Pleasant enough in his way, but an awkward customer to tackle. When I run up against a man with a mouth like his, I always give him a wide berth, if possible. It's a dashed funny thing, Dan, but I have an idea I have seen that guy before somewhere."

"Oh, is that so, Walt?" the other man

drawled. " If so, it must have been in the States. Bit awkward, if he recognized you, wouldn't it be? Rather spoil our game, eh? "

Walt Bradman smiled reassuringly. He was a fine figure of a man, well set up, cultured and easy in conversation, with every suggestion about him of one who has been accustomed to mix with good society all his life. His companion, Dan Cleaver, was of shorter, stouter build, but not without natural advantages, for he would have passed anywhere as the type of Englishman who is quite at home in country houses where horses and the performance of them on the race-course is the main topic of conversation. Altogether, two very presentable individuals, as was testified by the assiduous way in which the waiters attended to their wants. Still, in a flashing glance he had of them as he passed out, Clifford Cheriton had sized them up in his mind as two exceedingly choice specimens of the higher strata of criminality, in which he was not far wrong. But it took a trained eye like Clifford's to see under the hard and glittering surface, and it was only when the waiters had retired from the table that the two occupants relaxed from their splendid superiority and aloofness into what nature had intended them to be.

" So that's the girl, is it? " Cleaver asked.

" That's the peach, " Bradman responded.
" Yes, and I guess one of the ripest on the tree.

A real good looker if ever I saw one. And it is she who is going to spill the beans for us unless I am greatly mistaken."

"But, say, old hoss," Cleaver responded. "What's that young woman gotter do with it? Why, old man Seagrane didn't know she was alive a few months ago. He was going to leave everything he had got to young Andrew Canton as we know. Didn't he tell Nance Carey so? And didn't she pass the word on to you?"

"Yes, that's right enough," Bradman said. "But then old man Seagrane is not the first venerable ruin that fell for a pretty face and, mind you, Canton is playing a fool's game. The old man has paid his debts for him twice and it won't be long before he is asked to do so for the third time. Guys that make their pile hard ain't fond of pulling out their wads to pay a lot of card-sharps and money-lenders. Course, we know he made his will in Canton's favour and we know pretty well where that will is to be found. But if the young cub kicks over the traces too far and that lovely bunch of flowers we saw go out just now plays her hand right, then Seagrane might change his mind and she will get away with the lot. And if that happens, where do we come in? Mind you, we took a risk in coming over here——"

"Did we?" Cleaver grinned. "I thought we left the States more or less for the benefit of our health."

" Well, something like that, perhaps. But not entirely. I figure it out like this, Dan: we pool our capital and come over here to put it over old man Seagrane. And I reckon we've only got about four thousand dollars left. It costs big money to hit the high spot in this country, playing at being rich colonials and staying at the best hotels. What we have got to do is to clear out of here as soon as possible and go down to Sandchester for two or three weeks' golf. We can put up at the Dormy House there on the cheap, and get along with about forty or fifty dollars a week. Don't you forget that if old man Seagrane dies without a will, practically all that he has got goes to the State."

" But we know he has made a will, Walt."

" Oh, we know that," Bradman said impatiently. " But what is to prevent the guy altering it? And if he does, Canton will get next to nothing and we shall be in the soup. Four thousand dollars clean wasted. That is where the danger of the girl comes in. When I was down at Sandchester, I kept my lamps skinned and I see a few things. And I kept my ears open and I heard a lot more. I tell you, that peach is the real nigger in the wood-pile, if you know what I mean."

Cleaver drummed thoughtfully on the table with his finger-nails. He looked up furtively.

" You are not suggesting any violence, are you?" he whispered. " Because that ain't in my line,

pard. Besides, it's crude and too much like Chicago for my taste. Don't you forget we are not gunmen, whatever we used to be in the happy past."

For some time the two men sat there talking in undertones and keeping a sharp look-out lest the waiters who hovered about their table should catch a word here and there that was not intended for alien ears. Outwardly, at any rate, they were almost faultlessly correct. They had just that air of bland patronage and familiarity which is permissible between servants and their masters amongst those who have been born to the purple. Then presently they paid their bill and passed out into the road, where they took a taxi to the nearest music hall and, for the rest of the evening, gave themselves up to the pleasures of the West End. They were in no hurry, whatever their quarry might be, and now that they had made up their minds what to do and how to accomplish their end at a minimum outlay, there was nothing else to worry about.

Meanwhile, Cheriton had accompanied Evelyn back to her hotel and said good-night to her on the doorstep. As he turned away and strolled off in the direction of his rooms, he told himself that he was the happiest man in Europe.

Not that he was unduly elated or in the least carried away by the wonderful spell of good fortune which would have overwhelmed a less level-headed individual. But then, Cheriton had been through the mill for three years, and

a hard battle he had found it. To begin with, there was the stern, rigid discipline of the Police Force—hard enough to a young man who had left school with apparently all the world before him, only to find, a little later on, that the sudden death of his father had left him penniless. Everybody had been astonished to discover that one of the most brilliant men at the English Bar and one in the enjoyment of a princely income should have frittered everything away in a series of the wildest speculations. But there it was, and Clifford had had to make the best of it. Nor was he the type of youth to turn to his father's many friends for assistance. He would fight his own way in the world and, like many an ambitious youth of the same bent, he thought he could see his way to fame and fortune through his pen. And now, at long last, that weapon had proved a trusty one. Now he could go to the superintendent in the morning and tell him that, so far as he was concerned, the police career was at an end.

Not that the time had been wasted, because Clifford's knowledge of crime and criminology, obtained at first hand, was going to stand him in good stead in the line that he was cutting out for himself. Almost before he had reached his lowly lodgings, he had sketched out [the rough outline of a plot for his next story.

'And yet, he was dimly aware that there was a fly in the ointment somewhere. It was all very

well to step into a fortune and find the girl he had been unconsciously looking for, almost at the same moment, but there was more to it than that.

Had he found her too late? Three years is almost a lifetime to a woman between the ages of nineteen and twenty-two, and it was plain enough that Evelyn had developed amazingly in that time. She had grown from an exceedingly pretty child into a divinely beautiful woman and, moreover, it had been plain enough to Clifford that her mind had developed almost as perfectly as her body. She had rather fenced with him when he had had the temerity to ask if she had bestowed her affections in any particular direction, and he remembered how she had flushed when she had parried the question. Then, again, there was the fortunate individual named Andrew Canton who had been marked out to succeed to the Seagrane estates and the huge income that went with them. What sort of a young man was he? Evelyn had spoken fairly well of him, with a hint of that motherly suggestion that so often leads to a deeper and warmer feeling. Anyhow, Clifford was going to find out. As soon as he had freed himself from his responsibilities he would go down to Sandchester and spy out the land for himself.

With this resolution uppermost in his mind, Clifford let himself into his apartments with his latch-key and half an hour later was in bed and asleep.

CHAPTER IV

THE grand old Tudor pile known as Seagrane Holt stood on an eminence some three miles from the South Kent coast. The front of it faced the park, beyond which were the sand-dunes and, beyond them again, the famous Sandchester Golf Links. A year or two before, the house had been practically closed, for the late Earl had found it hard enough on a sadly depleted income and heavily mortgaged lands, to keep up a dozen rooms or so in a state of decent occupation, though he had steadfastly set his face against discharging any of the old servants, every one of whom had been born and bred on the property. The shooting and fishing had been let and the long array of glass houses had fallen almost into a state of decay. There was only one head gardener and he made the best of a bad job, seeing that at times there was not even enough coke on the premises to keep the furnaces alight. The lawns had grown long and weedy and the paths covered with green moss. All very picturesque from a short distance, but very lamentable from a close point of view. But all that was changed now. When the present holder of the title had come home,

he had arrived more in a spirit of curiosity than anything else. There was none of the pride of race or sense of position in him. He had left home far too early for that and in all his years of wandering and adventure he had hardly given the house in which he had been born a single thought.

But blood and tradition will tell and, almost before the new Earl had realized what a precious heritage his was, the place had got hold of him and he had plunged enthusiastically into a scheme for bringing it back to its pristine beauty.

He was a man of little or no education, but certainly not lacking in shrewdness and common sense. And he had seen in a flash, that here was a paying proposition if it was only properly handled. He instantly abandoned the idea of letting the house and going abroad again and decided, sensibly enough, that here was a haven for his old age beyond all his dreams. He was full sixty years of age, and, despite his splendid health and virility, he was beginning to feel that he was not exactly the man he used to be. He had a natural sense of the artistic and beautiful and here was a chance of gratifying it to the full. Scores of workmen of various sorts came down from London, extra gardeners were engaged and, such is the power of money, within a few months Seagrane Holt emerged with all its glories and traditions, more brilliantly than ever.

But though the great reception rooms with their panelled walls and the long picture gallery were no longer hidden in dust and gloom, and the electrics scintillated where smoky oil lamps had feebly illuminated those treasures before, there was a sense of loneliness that oppressed Seagrane and refused to be shaken off. True, he had looked up Andrew Canton, the only son of his late partner and established him at Seagrane Holt with more than a promise that the place would be his own some day, but the sense of loneliness and want of companionship lay over the old man like a nightmare. Nor was he getting along with young Canton quite as well as he had hoped.

He found the young man practically doing nothing and earning no more than a pittance in some questionable occupation. There was a reason, and a very strong reason indeed, why Seagrane wanted to do the best he could for the son of the man who had helped him to found his fortunes, and he was honest in his intention to do so. But, somehow or another, to the shrewd man of the world Canton did not ring quite true. There was nothing the matter with his breeding or his manners or his sense of sportsmanship, though he seemed to be lacking in the finer points. He was vain, egotistical and headstrong; moreover, he was a born gambler. Not one of those shrewd, calculating gamblers who study games of chance with a

view of self-aggrandisement and watch the fall of the cards much as a sportsman studies the form of a horse. He was more of the hot-headed, impetuous clan—a man who would have been prepared to gamble away the last penny he had, even if he had a wife and family depending upon him. It seemed to Seagrane that what he lacked was ballast, something to keep him on an even keel and arouse in him a proper sense of responsibility. He would be away for days at a time and then return in a sullen mood which invariably ended in a confession of some speculating folly with more than a hint that Seagrane should step into the breach and save the situation. Already, Seagrane, making due allowance for the folly of youth, had done this on two occasions. And he had given the impetuous youth a broad hint to the effect that he was not prepared to do so again.

"What you want, my lad," the old man said, "is some steadyng effect. I don't mind you having your fling, but you are thirty years of age now and it is time you began to realize that you haven't as many brains as you think. Until a young man does this, he is likely to be at the mercy of any well-dressed card-sharper who comes along. Now, look here, son, I have been making inquiries about some of your so-called friends and it seems to me that they are a pretty shady set. I have knocked about the world all my life and I flatter myself that I can

14931

recognize a rascal, even if I meet him the dark. You have got to settle down. I don't want to rub it in, but, I ask you, what were your prospects when I turned up and dragged you out of the City? Pretty darned thin, eh? Now, here is one of the finest properties in the land, with its place in history and all these family treasures got together by men whose names are famous, to say nothing of the means of keeping it up. It will be practically all yours one of these days if only you have sense enough to hold it down, but I am not such a darned fool as to give you the opportunity unless I see a change for the better. I would rather make it a home of rest for broken-down gamblers. And that is about all, my boy. But I mean it, yes, I mean it all right."

Canton listened rather sullenly, with a frown on that weakly-handsome face of his.

"Oh, I know I have been a fool," he admitted grudgingly. "This is some place, of course, but it is dull, infernally dull. You don't seem to cotton to your neighbours and I am not going to blame you for that, because they strike me as a set of duds, too. But what is a Paradise without an Eve or two in it?"

Seagrane looked shrewdly at the speaker.

"Boy, you have said it," he exclaimed. "I never thought of that. Of course, we do want some women."

It was after this conversation that Seagrane

set about finding relatives of the family. And, in the end, Evelyn and her mother were invited down to Seagrane Holt for a short stay, which ended in their taking up their quarters under that splendid and hospitable roof. Moreover, the scheme was a success from the first moment. The house badly wanted a mistress, and in Mrs. Marchand they found it. There was no veiled opposition in the servants' quarters, the mere fact that Mrs. Marchand was born at Seagrane Holt herself was quite sufficient for those who found themselves under her gentle and persuasive sway.

And within a week of Evelyn's coming, there wasn't even a dog in the estate that was not her devoted slave. Old Seagrane chuckled and rubbed his hands as he saw how well everything was going and said nothing, though he smiled to himself when he realized that Andrew Canton had been at Seagrane Holt for a whole four months without the slightest sign of restlessness or a disposition to run up to London on one of those expensive flights of his, and the old man's mind was beginning to see the realization of all his dreams.

Andrew Canton, a reformed character, married to Evelyn. With a wing in the great house placed at their disposal and in the future the chatter of children and the patter of their feet in the old corridors. . . .

Yes, that was the idea. So, for the present,

at any rate, there was peace and tranquillity under the ancient roof-tree and the promise of even better things to come. It would have been, perhaps, wiser of the old man if he had not so openly hinted to Evelyn at the dream in the back of his mind. She liked Canton because he was young and by no means unattractive. He could be amusing when it pleased him, and, so far as outdoor sports were concerned, he could hold his own with most people. And so it seemed to the girl that she might do a great deal worse, though she knew perfectly well that her heart was not touched, and that Andrew Canton had no thrill for her. Still, gratitude is a fine feeling when it is genuine, and perhaps but for that meeting with Clifford in London . . .

It was about twelve o'clock on the morning following the encounter with Cheriton that Evelyn returned to Seagrane Holt and found the Earl sitting under one of the ancestral cedars on the south lawn, placidly reading his *Times*.

"Hello, my dear!" he said. "Got back, have you? Well, did you find London looking much the same as it was when you last saw it? Want to go back there and live, by any chance?"

"Oh no, Uncle," Evelyn smiled. "That is the first time I have been in London since you came into our little house at Dalston like a great big fairy and spirited mother and myself down here. I feel as if I never wanted to see London again."

The old man looked at Evelyn fondly. It was just the sort of remark he had hoped her to make and it pleased him immensely.

"That's right, little girl," he said. "That's right. Well, what about that story of yours?"

"Oh, I think that is going to be all right," Evelyn said. "Mr. Lawrence was quite pleased with it. He encouraged me to go on and I think I shall. And then, when I had talked with him I had quite an adventure."

"You don't say. Spill it."

"Well, it was like this. Did you hear me speak of a man called Clifford Cheriton? No, I don't think you ever did."

"Sounds like the hero of one of your own stories," Seagrane chuckled. "Tell me all about him, honey."

"I was going to, Uncle. You see, when I was little more than a child and trying to get a living with my typewriter, I met Mr. Clifford Cheriton quite accidentally and he told me he wanted some typing done. I don't really believe he did, because he was only a policeman who thought he could write and I am sure that he had to go without one or two little luxuries in order to pay me for my work. I didn't realize it at the time, but I discovered it afterwards. I did work for him for about a year and then he had to go to America before the long story we were engaged upon was finished, and I lost sight of him altogether. You can imagine how

surprised I was to meet him in Mr. Lawrence's office and to hear that he had made a tremendous hit with the book that I had helped him with. The novel has been an immense success in America and it is going to be just as popular on this side. Anyhow, Mr. Cheriton left Mr. Lawrence's office with me with nearly £2,000 in his pocket and commissions lasting him for years. I don't believe he was half as pleased as I was. He is going to leave the Police Force and devote himself to writing in future."

"He seems to have told you quite a history," Seagrane said dryly. He did not fail to notice the girl's heightened colour. "I guess he was flattered at the interest you took in his work. But that was rather a high spot for a policeman, wasn't it?"

Evelyn laughed happily.

"Well, you see, Mr. Cheriton is not an ordinary policeman. His father was Sir Charles Cheriton, K.C., and one of the most famous barristers in London. He died not long after Mr. Cheriton left school, leaving the latter nothing. I think it was an extraordinary plucky thing of Clifford Cheriton to go into the Police Force like that and work himself up to sergeant's rank in so short a time. If he had stayed where he is, he would have gone very far. But I am sure he has made a wise decision."

"You seem to have had a pretty long talk."

"Yes, Uncle, we did," Evelyn said demurely.

" You see, he took me to dine at the Clarendon last night on the strength of his great good fortune and I suppose we were pretty intimate. And, oh yes, I had almost forgotten. When Mr. Cheriton was a boy he used to come down here with his father every summer holiday to play golf. And he says they were the happiest times of his life. And now that he is independent and must have his exercise regularly, he wants to come down here whenever he likes."

" Oh, he does, does he ? " Seagrane said dryly. " Attracted by the beauty of the neighbourhood, no doubt."

If Evelyn saw the point, she wisely ignored it and allowed it to pass serenely over her head.

" Partly, I suppose," she murmured. " But I think more for old associations' sake than anything else. He spoke of different spots in the neighbourhood, more particularly about that old cottage of yours on the sand-dunes at the back of the seventh hole. He said that he had always wanted to buy that and make it a weekend cottage. One of the little dreams a poor man has when he begins to see that fortune is not altogether against him. And if he can't buy the cottage, he wondered if you would let him have it on a long lease."

" Yes, and I suppose he persuaded you to put it to me just like that, knowing that I can refuse you nothing," the old man chuckled. " What's he like ? Is he one of those pretty boys ? "

"Certainly not," Evelyn cried indignantly. "He is a splendid type of man. Anyone who has gone through what he has without complaining must ring true. I thought you would like to have someone of that sort to play golf with yourself."

"Shrewd kid," Seagrane chuckled. "There is not a man in the world who is keener on a game of golf than I am. But it is not everybody I care to play with. Give me a real good sportsman who will play the game for its own sake and doesn't make an excuse for every bad stroke he makes. And doesn't want to have bets on. There are only about half a dozen people down here that I care to turn out with, though I am able to hold my own with most of them at my handicap."

"Oh, don't be so modest," Evelyn laughed. "Your handicap of scratch is by no means a complimentary one, and I am sure the committee here didn't give it you simply because you are president of the club by right of your title, and the fact that you are the landlord of the links. I am certain you would enjoy a game against Clifford."

"I thought it was Cheriton just now," Seagrane said shrewdly. "Oh, well, it doesn't much matter. Then I suppose you want me to let that young man have a lease of the cottage. Is that it?"

"Yes, Uncle," Evelyn said frankly. "I want

you to let him have a long lease of it so that he can furnish it to please himself and play his golf, and do his writing in a spot where there is no one to disturb him. Of course, I am not going to ask you to do this until you have seen him, first."

"Well, I dare say that can be managed. When does he want to come? I suppose it will take him some time to clear up his affairs in London and all that sort of thing."

"Oh no, I should think not. He told me he would be free by the end of the week. And if he can manage that, he will come down here on Saturday and put up at the Dormy House. Then you will be able to see him early next week—"

"Dormy House nothing," the old man replied. "If that young man is a friend of yours, he is a friend of mine. I suppose, haply, he has met your mother?"

"Oh yes, he knows mother," Evelyn explained.

"Well, you tell her all about it and ask her to send the guy a note saying that I shall be glad to see him as a guest here this week-end and he can stay as long as he likes, and she can mention, too, the matter of the cottage, and if I find this beau of yours is half you say he is, then he can have it on a lease for as many years as he chooses. Fact is, we don't have half enough people down here. Now, you run along to Ma and fix the

whole thing up and leave me to my study of English politics, which is more than I can grasp at times."

"That is very nice and kind of you, Uncle," Evelyn said gratefully. "I'll go and ask mother to write that letter now."

CHAPTER V

CLIFFORD CHERITON was, however, not destined to get clear of London quite as soon as he expected. On the face of it, all that he had to do was to hand in his resignation and take leave of his colleagues within the next seven days. But when he presented himself at Scotland Yard on the Monday morning, his superior officer greeted him with the curt information that there was a rather important piece of work to be done and that he, Cheriton, must think himself exceedingly lucky to have part of it placed in his hands. He looked at Inspector Merrick in dismay.

"Well, what is biting you now?" the latter rasped. He was one of the older school that is fast dying out and believed in direct methods. A man of little education, who had obtained his present post partly by influence and partly by a sort of dogged determination which had often led him to follow up successfully a clue that cleverer men had abandoned. "You look at me as if I had done you a mischief, instead of putting a real class job in your way. What's the matter with you?"

"Oh, nothing," Clifford said. "Only I came

up this morning on purpose to tell you that I was leaving in a week."

"Oh, did you?" Merrick snorted. "That more or less depends upon you, my lad. Come into a fortune or something of that sort? Or getting tired of hard work."

"Well, perhaps I have come into a fortune," Clifford smiled. "At any rate, I have prospects, and substantial ones, which make it possible for me to live very comfortably without working at all. At least, what you would call work. And if it is all the same to you, I should like to say good-bye to the Yard on Saturday."

"Well, you won't," Merrick snapped. "At least, not until you can get to the bottom of a bit of business in connection with a strange affair at the Grand Park Hotel. We can't have chaps like you coming in at a moment's notice and wanting to go. Now, look here, Cheriton, I don't want to stand in your way and I don't want to appear nasty, but, with one thing and another, we are bunged up here and there is nobody I can think of who can take your place. If you hadn't been for about a year in America, the assignment would have gone elsewhere. But there is not anybody just now who knows the States, and that is where you come in. If you can get the thing through within a week, well, then, you can pack up and quit. Or perhaps you might get it far enough advanced

and leave somebody else to round it off. But you are not going to leave us in the lurch in this casual way."

"I don't want to," Clifford retorted. "It is rather a nuisance; but still, I am at your disposal and there is no occasion to say any more about it. What's the idea?"

"Well, it's like this," said a slightly mollified Merrick. "There is an American woman staying at the Grand Park Hotel who rang us up last night saying that she had been robbed of a whole lot of jewels. It appears that, instead of handing them in to the office of the hotel, as she ought to have done, she kept them in a small steel-lined trunk concealed under a false bottom. At least, that is what she says, and I am bound to confess that the list she supplied us tallies with certain purchases she made from time to time at Tiffany's in New York. We have more or less proved that by telephone. Fine thing, that Atlantic telephone, eh? A bit expensive, but likely to prove useful to us in the long run. But I am getting away from the point. I have seen this lady and I am inclined to think that she is telling the truth. She has been staying where she is for the last fortnight, and when I heard that she hadn't paid her bill because she had not received certain remittances from New York, I thought it was a put-up thing. She told me that she had pawned a diamond ornament in the Strand,

seeing that she had run out of funds, and when I came to inquire into that, she was sure enough telling the truth. I have never heard of her before, but she says she is well known on the other side of the water as a vaudeville actress."

"What is her name?" Cheriton asked.

"Name of Nance Carey."

"You don't say?" Cheriton exclaimed. "I know all about her. At least, all about her that is necessary for my purpose. She is not quite in the first flight, but very near it. I happened to come across her in America and she was introduced to me by a man high up in the Police Force. She started life somewhere in the wilds of Arizona, where she lived the life of a cowboy. She can ride and shoot with the best of them and I believe that she knows all the mining camps in the North-West, because she played in what the Yankees call one-hoss towns all over the mining district, when she went on the stage. Exceedingly good looking and smart as they make 'em. But clever in an unscrupulous sort of way and always ready to turn admiration to account. But what on earth is she doing in England?"

"I asked her that," Merrick replied, "and I didn't get a particularly satisfactory reply. However, that is nothing to do with the case. I want you to go down and see her and get her own story and, afterwards, see what you can

do for her. In the meantime, she is more or less in pawn in her hotel."

Swallowing his disappointment as best he might, Cheriton went off to the Grand Park Hotel, and, a little later, found himself seated in the private sitting-room of the bereaved actress. He remembered her perfectly, but he was not altogether displeased when he found that their recognition was not mutual. Miss Carey did not even call his name to mind when he mentioned it. She looked up from the card he had given her and favoured him with one of her celebrated smiles.

"So you are Sergeant Clifford Cheriton," she asked. "Come to help me in my trouble. Well, I should say we shall get on very well together. You look more like a gentleman than a policeman."

"I suppose it is possible to be both," Cheriton smiled.

"Not in America, not there by a whole street," the actress smiled. "Leastwhile, there may be exceptions, but I never met them. Now, you just sit down in that settee and we'll have a heart-to-heart talk. It's like this. I thought I would quit for a few months and take a long vacation. I have had a pretty hard life and I want to lie on the shelf, sonny. So I packed up my grip and I came East on the first Cunarder I could catch. Then I stayed in Paris for a few weeks, and when I landed in

England I was what you call broke to the world. But there were funds waiting for me in New York and I cabled for a remittance. It didn't come, because my business man had gone off to California for a spell, so I had to do the best I could till he got back. But it was darned awkward, because I had no friends on this side and only a few cents in my wallet."

"That must have been very distressing," Clifford murmured.

"I'll tell the world it was. And me stranded in England with nothing but my name to go on and putting up at a swell hotel like this where my suite alone costs me a hundred dollars a week. Now, I ain't saying that is an extortionate charge, but it is pretty salty when you have got nothing but a few dimes in your pocket."

"Quite a new experience for you, I suppose?"

"Well, it is and it isn't. I have known the times out West when I have had to lie in bed for the best part of two days waiting for a square meal. And I have been out on the prairie with nothing between me and starvation besides a hunk of stale bread and a bit of dried meat. But I wasn't worrying much, because I know my remittances will come along in a day or two, now. So I just slipped out a day or two ago and put a diamond bracelet in soak. That gave me about a hundred dollars to carry on with, but it didn't pay my bill or anything like it. So I told the manager of this hotel exactly

how I stood and I guess he had to make the best of it."

All this with a dazzling smile and a flash of white teeth, just as if the actress was relating some pleasing experience.

"It would have been better, perhaps," Clifford suggested, "if you had handed your jewel case to the manager and asked him to put it in the hotel safe."

"Yes, we can all be wise when it is too late, can't we? Between you and me, I did show him a few of my pretty things and I guess that satisfied him that I wasn't just an impostor. But when he hinted that I might let him take care of those diamonds, I told him that they were safer with me and that was what you call the end of the first chapter."

"You mean that you kept them in your own possession?"

"I guess I did. Now, I am not going to say a word against the manager of the hotel, because my experience is that those sort of people don't talk, and again, he gave me good advice, which I was foolish enough to ignore. And why? Well, I'll tell you. I have got a sort of suitcase that isn't altogether a suit-case as much as a light safe. Cane on the outside and the lining, metal. Just the sort of thing no one would take any notice of because it looks like the kind of case a woman would keep odds and ends in. And in that case is a false bottom, and in that

false bottom I kept all my jools. Sounds a bit like the house that Jack built, doesn't it? Now, I put that case in my dressing-room and locked it away in a wardrobe. I know the contents were safe the night before last, because I looked to see. You understand I was contemplating another deal with my friend the pawn-broker in the Strand, and I picked out an emerald clasp that seemed to suit my purpose. A few hours later—just after breakfast, as a matter of fact—I decided to change the emerald for a ruby, and then I found what had happened."

"Everything had vanished, in fact?"

"Every blessed bit. And, mind you, the lock hadn't been forced, neither had the lock of my dressing-room door. And if you gave me all the money in all the world, I couldn't give the ghost of a guess as to how the thief found out that I was carrying my jools in that case or that there was a false bottom to it. Anyway, the jay got away with the lot and now I have only got a few dollars till I hear from America. I have given the manager of the hotel an address in New York he can call up by that new Atlantic telephone service so as to establish my respectability or whatever you like to call it, and I believe he is going to do so. But that has got nothing to do with you, Mr. Detective. Your business is to find out where my jools have gone and how they were taken. I tell you I was real

hopping mad when I made that discovery of my loss, because I have just got to sit here cooling my heels and reading the newspapers till I hear from my business man in New York. It may be a week longer. Meanwhile, I am just like a pampered canary in a golden cage without the means to open the door. Say, can't you help me?"

"I will do my best," Cheriton said. "Now, first of all, have you told anybody about your loss?"

"I guess I am not that sort of mammy's girl," Miss Carey dimpled. "I never squealed, even when I saw that there was nothing in the bottom of the cage. I just rung the bell quietly for the manager and told him what had happened. He is a wise guy and I quite agreed with him that not a single word of this should be spoken to anybody but the police. I don't think there is a person in the hotel who knows that I have been robbed."

"So much the better," Cheriton replied. "All you can do for the moment is to make the best of your loss and your unfortunate position. Meanwhile, I will go and interview the manager and come back to you when I have anything to report."

The manager of the Grand Park Hotel confirmed in every detail what Cheriton had just heard.

"I am afraid I can't help you, sergeant,"

he said. "At first I thought it was some new sort of trick that was being played upon me by a mere adventuress who found herself unexpectedly unable to meet her bill. But when I saw those jewels, I had to change my opinion."

"You are quite sure they were genuine?"

"My dear sir," the manager said impressively, "I have handled too much of that sort of thing in my time to be deceived. I should say that those gems were worth between twenty and thirty thousand pounds. I tried to persuade the lady to hand them over to me for safe custody, but I didn't worry much when she refused. You see, it was no funeral of mine. Besides, I gathered from the chambermaid that looks after the suite that Miss Carey's wardrobe is worth almost as much as her jewels. And when I had a satisfactory reply from New York, of course I didn't worry any more about it. So if you imagine that this is a case in which the manager of the hotel bought a gold brick, you are entirely mistaken. I have every reason to believe that Miss Carey is one of America's leading actresses."

"Well, not quite that," Cheriton demurred. "But she has a big reputation in the musical-comedy line. When we met just now I didn't remind her that it wasn't the first time that we had been face to face, but, as a matter of fact, I was introduced to her in New York, though she has entirely forgotten it. Mind you, I don't

mind that, because it may prove very useful later on. What I should like to do now is to go through the register of your present customers. It is pretty obvious to me that the robbery was committed by somebody staying in the house, a visitor probably, or it may even be a servant."

"A servant, eh?" the manager asked. "Well, it is possible. We rather pride ourselves on our staff, but, considering that there are about a hundred and eighty of them, there is just a chance that one or more of these may be the guilty ones."

"Yes, I quite agree with you there," Cheriton said. "But I should be more inclined to gamble on a visitor. However, let us go through your more recent arrivals."

It was a long job and late in the afternoon before Clifford had finished. There were well-known people to be eliminated and others who were entirely beyond suspicion. But towards the bottom of the list there were individuals of whom no one knew anything, just the odd flotsam and jetsam that come and go in a great hotel and then are heard of no more. Clifford made a mental note of some of these and three sets of names he carefully entered in his pocket-book.

"I have got two lots here," he exclaimed, "that I should like to have a little conversation with. I don't say that any of them has any-

thing to do with the trouble, but I should like to know what they were doing between twelve and dawn on the night of the robbery. You see, it is my business to look after the well-dressed thief. I mean the man or woman who is well educated and has all the outward signs of mixing with good society. As a matter of fact, a good many of them do mix with good society, because they have been born and bred into it. Others have acquired it by careful observation and a natural gift for that sort of thing. Here and there a man can do it, but it is a rôle in which women excel. If you ask me to give you an opinion, I should say that this job was the work of a man and a woman, the woman being already acquainted with Miss Carey. I must ask her presently."

"Then you think they were staying in the house?"

"I do," Clifford said. "And, what is more, the couple I suspect had a double bedroom on the same floor as Miss Carey's suite. It would be a very easy matter for the woman to see that the coast was clear while the man tackled the work. I suppose it is no uncommon thing for a visitor to have a bath at two or three o'clock in the morning. I mean, after they come in from dancing at a night-club, or something of that sort?"

"Oh, well," the manager explained. "A great hotel like this is something like a fair.

People come and go at all times. And if a woman was seen going along the corridor at two o'clock in the morning on her way to the bathroom, it wouldn't raise the slightest suspicion."

"That is just what I mean," Clifford said. "She could be playing about in one of the bathrooms in the middle of the night and keeping an eye open for interruption at the same time. Then the man could get to work, feeling pretty sure that his victim was fast asleep in her bedroom. Now, look here, Mr. Manager, what about these two?"

With that, Clifford laid a finger opposite two names in his note-book, and the manager nodded as he did so.

"Yes, I see what you are driving at," he remarked. "Those people were here for one night and that the night when the robbery took place. I will make definite inquiries, but I think you will find that they came here for dinner and left by taxi after breakfast the following morning. The names are not familiar to me and, in any case, they are probably assumed ones—presuming them to be the culprits."

"Well, if you don't mind, I should like to have a few words with the chambermaids and the hotel porter, and the waiter who looked after them at dinner and breakfast."

"I will call them if you like," the manager responded. "But the evening waiter has not

come on duty yet. You can see the breakfast-room waiter and the chambermaid."

"All right," Clifford said. "I dare say they will serve my purpose. Only don't allow them to think that the trouble is in any way connected with Miss Carey."

Within half an hour, Clifford had a fairly accurate description of the couple in which he was interested and then he went upstairs again to see his distressed client.

"Well?" she asked eagerly. "Well?"

"It is not so easy as all that," Clifford smiled. "I think, however, that I have unearthed a likely clue. But before going any further, I want to ask you a pertinent question. And I am going also to suggest that you don't speak definitely until you are very satisfied that you are saying what is correct. I don't mean for a moment to infer that you will make any attempt to mislead me, but one forgets sometimes. Now did you ever tell anybody—*anybody*, mind—about your jewels?"

"Newspaper men and that crowd, say?"

"No, no. They, of course, would speak of your priceless gems and so on because that is their business. I mean friends, especially lady friends liable to talk. Now did you never confide in some soul-mate, feminine, the story of the shabby case with the false lining? Think, think hard, Miss Carey."

Miss Carey thought until her forehead was

lined and worn, and her flexible mouth grew stern.

"I had a maid once," she said, "who was with me for some few months before she got married and left me more or less in the soup, way back somewhere in the West. A New Yorker she was, and as cute as they are made. An imitative little cuss and a born mimic. Yes, Sadie Blunt might have known because she knew that I hid my jools when on the road. But you don't suggest that Sadie after this long time came all the way in my tracks to put it over me like this when she could have done it out yonder."

"It does sound improbable, but you never know," Cheriton agreed. "And yet sometimes clever little mimics grow into still more clever crooks. And now, if you don't mind, perhaps you will be so kind as to show me the steel-lined case in which your gems were deposited. Finger-prints? Oh no; the class of people we are dealing with are not likely to work without rubber gloves."

Miss Carey seemed to be getting bored with the interview. She had no objection to the course suggested by Cheriton—all she wanted at the moment was to get out of the hotel into the fresh air on this lovely morning, and watch life in the Park.

"If I can't join in it I can watch it," she sighed. "So you just nose around here as

much as you like and if any miracle happens, 'phone me later."

Clifford wanted nothing better than to be left alone in that luxurious sitting-room with the suit-case to examine. This he proceeded to do as soon as Miss Carey had vanished. There was nothing in it but some letters and a couple of newspapers of a more or less remote date—American papers of the yellow variety. On the centre page of one of them was a photographic reproduction of two men and under it the cut line: "A Gross Miscarriage of Justice. The Leading Actors in the Test Case."

They were the two men Cheriton had seen at the Clarendon on the night that he and Evelyn Marchand had dined there!

CHAPTER VI

IT might have been nothing more than a coincidence, but it was certainly strange, that in the steel-lined suit-case Cheriton should have come across a newspaper containing the photographs of the two men who had been dining at the Clarendon on the night when he had been there with Evelyn, and whom she declared were talking about her. Cheriton had taken particular notice of them at the time, so that the photographs on the newspaper he had found in Nance Carey's suit-case left no doubt in his mind that these were the identical individuals who, apparently, in prosperous circumstances, were doing themselves so well in one of London's premier restaurants. Whether or not they had anything to do with the loss of Miss Carey's diamonds, Cheriton was not concerned to know for the moment, but it was certainly a significant discovery.

He was still turning this over in his mind when Nance Carey came back from her stroll in Hyde Park.

"I guess you haven't done much," she suggested.

"Well, I must confess that I haven't," Cher-

ton replied. "Now, would you mind answering me a question in turn? Can you tell me anything in connection with some set of circumstances in the United States called the Test Case?"

Cheriton happened to be looking directly at his companion when he asked the question, and he noticed that the fresh colour in her cheeks drained into a sort of deadly whiteness and that her lips trembled. It was only for a moment, but the impression was there and Clifford registered it.

"The Test Case?" Nance Carey said with a brave attempt to keep her voice steady. "Oh, let me see. It does seem to strike a familiar chord. And yet I can't for the life of me connect it with anything likely to be of use to you. But why do you ask me the question?"

"I can hardly tell you," Cheriton said evasively. "You see, we policemen have to make note of even the smallest things. You know, I was in America myself for a year in connection with a criminal we were anxious to extradite, and when I was there I saw a good deal of the work of the New York police. I shouldn't have spoken on the subject to you, but I found in your suit-case a newspaper which I examined more or less casually."

With that, Cheriton produced the sheet and pointed out the photographs on the front page to the actress.

"There are the men," he said. "Curiously enough, their names are not given, nor can I find any allusion to them in any part of the letterpress. But, hazarding a guess, I should say that they were two criminals who had been lucky enough to slip through the meshes of the law. You see what it says underneath—a gross miscarriage of justice."

By this time Nance Carey had quite recovered her equanimity.

"Perhaps," she said. "And, on the other hand, they might be two men who had been wrongly convicted. I should have thought that even a detective would have seen that there were two sides to a question."

There was something mocking, almost challenging, in the way in which the actress spoke. And yet, a few moments before, she had been moved deeply enough when Cheriton had alluded to the Test Case. However, he swept the matter on one side now as if he had dismissed it from his mind, and proceeded to discuss the loss of the jewels from another angle.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "Now, Miss Carey, I am going to tell you that I haven't gone very far, except to satisfy myself that this robbery was committed by somebody in the hotel."

"A servant, perhaps," she suggested.

"No, I don't think so. Probably somebody who has been watching your movements for a

long time, knowing perfectly well that it is your habit to travel with a great deal of personal property in your possession. I should like to see your maid."

"Well, I guess I haven't got one just now," the actress said. "My last one left me in Paris. Met an old lover of hers and went off without a word to me, to marry him."

"Really, I wonder—but it is no use dwelling on that point—at least, not yet. Now, somebody has been trailing you probably for weeks. Not the ordinary type of jewel thief, but one of the leaders in the profession. A man and his wife who were staying in this hotel and left shortly after breakfast on the day that you discovered your loss, are being traced. I have seen the waiter and the chambermaids and, from them, I have a very accurate description of both the man and the woman. They gave the name of Mr. and Mrs. Martin with an address near Folkestone. I have no doubt by this time that the constable who is acting with me has found the taxi-man who drove them to the station and, in the course of the day, I ought to be on their track. I will come back here to-morrow morning if I have anything further to report."

With this, Clifford bowed himself out and made his way to the manager's office. Yes, the latter said, the taxi-cab driver had been found by the commissionaire who had called

him and he had quite a lot to say. He had picked up the lady and gentleman at the hotel door when summoned by the commissionaire, and had driven them to Victoria Station. There, as there happened to be no porter available, he had asked a fellow taxi-man to look after his cab for a moment or two whilst he, himself, had carried the passengers' luggage and seen it placed in the guard's van.

It would be an easy matter now to discover from the booking clerk where the couple had taken tickets for and, for the moment, Clifford had only to mark time and wait developments.

They came the next morning when he went to Scotland Yard to report progress to Inspector Merrick. He found the latter in one of his worst moods.

"Well, you have made a pretty nice hash of it, Cheriton," he said. "A proper wild-goose chase you led the plain-clothes man. He came in here last night, having spent most of the day at Folkestone, to inform us that Mr. and Mrs. Martin are highly respectable people who have been living on their own estate for the last twenty-five years and who appear to be quite well connected. The man is a J.P. and a prospective Conservative candidate for his Division. That is the worst of you kid-glove amateurs. I always said it was a mistake to have gentlemen at Scotland Yard except, perhaps, the Commissioner and one or two

people like that. I never knew a public-school man who was worth his salt as a detective. Give me a common or garden policeman I can train."

This was an old obsession of Merrick's and Cheriton allowed it to pass. He rarely came in contact with his superior without being compelled to listen to some gibe at the higher type of men now being drafted into the service.

"I am sorry," he said. "It looked to me a very likely clue and, at any rate, I thought it worth following up. Even now, I am not sure that it isn't. I know that the lady called Mrs. Martin did have a bath at an hour past two o'clock in the morning of the robbery, and I should like to see her and ask her if she noticed anything suspicious while she was passing and returning along the corridor after her visit to the bathroom."

"Well, you can wash that all out," Merrick said. "It seems to me that you have lost more than twenty precious hours and wasted the time of your subordinate. I am taking the case out of your hands altogether."

"Oh, you are, are you?" Cheriton retorted a little savagely. "Then, in that case, I don't feel myself any longer bound to the Department. If my services are no longer needed, then I suppose I can go on Saturday?"

"You can go now, as far as I am concerned," Merrick snarled. "And good riddance to you."

"Thanks very much," Cheriton smiled. "Good-bye, Inspector Merrick, and good luck to you."

Five minutes later, Cheriton had shaken the dust of Scotland Yard from his feet and walked briskly along the Embankment with the air of a man who has had a great responsibility lifted from his shoulders. He had always known that Merrick hated him and had done all he could to stand between him and promotion. But that was the attitude of the old dyed-in-the-wool type of detective towards education in any form.

It seemed to Cheriton that he might have held himself in check a little longer and enlightened Merrick on the question of the newspaper he found in the steel-lined suit-case, and how agitated Miss Carey had been when he mentioned the matter of those two photographs. He felt convinced, at the back of his mind, that the actress knew those men intimately and that they were in some way connected with the loss of her jewels.

That is, if the jewels were ever lost at all. The hotel manager had been convinced of their genuineness, but then, even experts had been deceived sometimes by clever imitations. It was just possible that there were one or two genuine specimens amongst the lost gems—indeed, one of these had been pawned, possibly to give the case an air of verisimilitude. Alto-

gether it was a very pretty case as it stood and one that, in ordinary circumstances, Cheriton would have been only too pleased to investigate. But now that Merrick had taken it out of his hands and he had been practically kicked out of Scotland Yard, it was going to be no business of his, he told himself, to put Merrick wise with regard to the newspaper discovery.

By the time he had reached his rooms, Cheriton had put the case out of his mind altogether. He was his own master now, with a small fortune in the bank and an assured income before him. He was free to come and go as he pleased, free to get on with the work in which his heart was, and free as soon as he could settle matters in London to go down to Sandchester and play as much golf as he liked. Congenial work every morning with a round in the afternoon, and the evening to call his own. He had already planned out the framework of a new novel, and, with all the eagerness of a schoolboy, he wanted to get into it without delay.

But there were several things to do: new golf clubs to be purchased, a visit to his old tailor who would welcome him with open arms. And then, perhaps, at the end of the week, Sandchester luring him down to that delectable spot.

It was nearly the end of the week before he

had finished and he returned to his rooms for the last time, there to do his final packing for the exit on the morrow. There was a solitary letter waiting for him in a strange handwriting. He tore it open and looked at the signature.

It came from Seagrane Holt and was signed Marion Marchand.

Evelyn's mother, of course. And Evelyn's mother writing on behalf of Lord Seagrane inviting him down to the Holt for as long as he liked, coupled with the information that the writer would be only too pleased to see him again and renew her friendship with one who had been so kind to her daughter in the days gone by. Cheriton was not to trouble to reply, but come down at once and, if he would send a telegram saying what time his train would arrive at Sandgate, a car would be there to meet him.

And so it came about that just before lunch the following day, he found himself at Seagrane Holt sitting at a table with Mrs. Marchand opposite him.

"I am glad you could come so quickly," she said. "Evelyn told me all about that wonderful meeting of yours in London and how you had suddenly become a celebrity."

"Not quite that," Clifford said modestly.

"Oh, but you are. Evelyn said so, and so did Mr. Lawrence. And in the last two or three weeks I have seen your name in several

newspapers. Isn't it a funny thing that one day you have never heard of a person and then the next day you find his name everywhere. But I dare say you think it rather strange Lord Seagrane and Evelyn are not here to meet you. As a matter of fact, they had to go to Maidstone on business—at least, Lord Seagrane had—and he thought you wouldn't mind if he asked Evelyn to go with him. Those two are wonderfully good friends. I don't know what he would do without her."

"Oh, of course I don't mind," Cheriton said. "I think it true hospitality on his lordship's part to treat me just as if I were an old friend. I suppose Mr. Andrew Canton has gone along with them."

It seemed to Cheriton that a shadow crossed Mrs. Marchand's pleasant features. He thought he could read a coldness in her eyes and, at the same time, something like anxiety.

"Oh, Andrew Canton," she said. "No, he is not at Holt for the moment. He has been in Town the last few days. He has been a good deal in Town the last couple of weeks."

With that remark, Mrs. Marchand passed on to generalities. But to the trained detective's mind, it was plain that the subject of Andrew Canton was not a pleasant one. Yet here was a man who, according to what Evelyn had told him, was destined, at no distant date, to inherit Seagrane Holt with all its priceless

treasures, to say nothing of the huge income with which to keep it up. Just the sort of man, in fact, that a woman with a marriageable daughter would favour as her future son-in-law. Indeed, Evelyn had almost hinted that an arrangement like that was as good as settled. But certainly not in Mrs. Marchand's mind, if he could read the signs aright.

"This is a wonderful old place," Cheriton said, by way of changing the conversation. "I can quite understand how happy you and Evelyn are here."

"Yes, indeed," Mrs. Marchand agreed enthusiastically. "Even now it seems like a happy dream. Because it was such a hard struggle in the old days. And those sordid streets! Shall I ever forget them? The more you see of Seagrane Holt, the more you will fall in love with it. And the more you will like the dear old man that it belongs to. He is what some people would call a rough diamond, but he has a heart of gold. You will find him so full of energy and vitality, and if he does have occasional fits of moodiness and depression, then I am sure you will make allowances for them. I am telling you this, because I believe you intend to spend a lot of your time down here."

"At least half the year, I hope. My ambition is to get hold of that old cottage looking over the golf links and restore it more or less to

what it was when it was built, more than two hundred years ago. You see, I know the place, Mrs. Marchand, and I have sketched out all the improvements that I want to do. Furnished in period style with a large lounge-hall-sitting-room and two or three bedrooms. Then a woman to come in daily to look after my requirements and, if Lord Seagrane will permit it, the extension of the electric light. But I am counting my chickens before they are hatched, I am afraid."

"Oh, I don't think so," Mrs. Marchand smiled. "Evelyn told Lord Seagrane what you wanted, and when he heard what a good friend you had been to us in the days of poverty, he jumped at the idea. I am quite sure you can have all the improvements you want, indeed he told me that there was far more old furniture in this house than is necessary and he proposed going over some of it with you so that you can take your pick. And mind, not a word about payment. If you really want to annoy him, you have only to make a business of what is a pleasure to him."

"It seems to me that I have walked straight out of dreary old London into a sort of grown-up fairyland," Cheriton said.

"Well, it is something like that," Mrs. Marchand laughed. "Lord Seagrane likes you already, and if you will only give him a game of golf occasionally, you will win him entirely.

I believe he plays a very good game for his age, but there are very few men he cares to play with. Just one or two who come down from London occasionally for the sheer love of the game. You see, he is rather old-fashioned, and the young men in picturesque pullovers and alarming plus-fours who want to make the game a gamble, are his special aversion."

"I am not very keen on them myself," Cheriton remarked. "It is a great game, is golf, and one you can play for its own sake without introducing the money element. If you don't mind, I think I will walk down to the Dormy House presently, and arrange for a locker. I am hoping that it will be possible for me to become a full member of the club, though possibly I shall have to wait for that for some considerable time."

"Indeed you won't," Mrs. Marchand told him. "You see, the links belongs to his lordship and carry the right of election to any friend of his. Of course, he would not abuse that privilege, but I think you can safely count on becoming a regular member of our famous club. Would you like me to ask one of the men to carry your clubs?"

"Oh no, thank you," Cheriton said. "It will be a joy to have them in my hands again. Besides, I want to see old James's face when I walk into the Dormy House bar. You see, when my father was alive, we used to come

down here a great many week-ends, and always in August, and James, the Dormy House steward, was quite a chum of mine when I was a kid. He is getting an old man now; but when I knew him, he had a wonderful memory for faces. I don't think anybody ever played golf, even once, at Sandchester, that James didn't recognize by name if he turned up ten years later. I don't imagine he will have forgotten me, though I have not seen him since I was a boy at school."

"Just as you like," Mrs. Marchand said. "I dare say you want to have a look round the links for the sake of old times. And by the time you get back here to tea at four o'clock, our absent ones will have returned."

It was a little later that Cheriton crossed the park in the warm sunshine of a perfect afternoon, carrying his bag of clubs in his hand. He could see various figures dotted about the links and, beyond them, the stretch of golden sands fringed with the creamy white of the incoming tide, and his heart fairly sang within him with the joy of life that was sweet to his lips. He came presently to the club-house itself, a fine structure looking out over the Channel. And beyond that, a little to his right, the Dormy House where members foregathered for week-ends and talked over the battles of the day, or played their game of bridge as the case might be. And there, behind

the long bar, was an oldish man with white hair and side whiskers, looking the typical picture of the gentleman's servant he had once been, before he came to preside over the fortunes of the Dormy House. He looked up as Cheriton came in and bade him a respectful good afternoon.

"I expect you have forgotten me, James," Clifford said.

The old man put on his spectacles and, directly he had done so, a smile broke out on his face.

"Lor' bless you, no, sir," he said. "You was just a big schoolboy when I saw you last, but your father will never be dead so long as you are alive, sir."

"Fishing, aren't you?" Cheriton laughed. "Waiting for a lead, eh? You vain old man! Still keeping up the pose of remembering everybody who ever crossed this doorstep."

The old man laughed in appreciation of the joke.

"Deed and it's true, sir," he said. "Just as if I should forget a Cheriton! You was only a lad when I see you last, but I recollect. Ay, and the way Sir Charles got that poor boy of mine off when he fell into trouble and never charged me a halfpenny! Let me see, it's Mr. Clifford Cheriton."

"Go up top," Cheriton smiled. "I am coming more or less to live here, James. That

old cottage behind the seventh hole. His lordship is letting me have it on lease. I am staying with him until we get matters settled."

"Delighted to hear it, sir. And his lordship is one of the best. Not a bit like the old Earl, but a Marchand, every inch of him, all the same. Rare popular he's made hisself since he come from America. Well, well, to think—— Beg pardon, sir."

Old James broke off to speak to a new-comer who asked for some sort of drink. There were two individuals, in fact, and as Cheriton glanced at them he started slightly.

For they were the two same men he had seen at the Clarendon and photographically reproduced in Miss Carey's American newspaper!

CHAPTER VII

CLIFFORD'S training stood him in good stead as he watched the new-comers and appeared to study them with mild interest. Just the sort of interest that one would have expected a golfer to regard another who is a stranger to him. All the same, he rather resented the way in which he had been pushed aside by the tall man, though it was no time to show what he was feeling. The tall man leant over the bar and addressed James as if he had been some quite ordinary individual.

"Two stone-gingers and gin," he commanded. "Wake up, bar-keeper; don't be all day about it."

Old James visibly stiffened. He was not accustomed to being addressed as bar-keeper by Dormy House visitors, for James was the type of man who has shaken hands with royalty more than once and the name of a certain popular prince was inscribed in his autograph book, to say nothing of ambassadors and a large section of the British aristocracy. In his way, James was a celebrity, spoken of all over the world, and he certainly resented the newcomer's easy impudence.

But, all the same, James knew his place and said nothing, whilst he busied himself in the bar attending his customers. All this time Clifford was studying the two customers carefully and wondering where on earth he had seen the tall one before. But, for once in a way, his keen memory for faces failed him. He could see, like some dim picture from the past, a scene in a New York garden restaurant with which the tall man was connected. But, for the life of him, Cheriton could not attach the two together. He waited, smoking a cigarette, until the two strangers had finished their drinks and left again.

"Who are those two, James?" he asked.

"I don't know, sir," James said. "They come down here in a car this morning and put their names down for a week. The tall man calls hisself Mr. Walt Bradman and the little fat one as looks like a jockey is Mr. Dan Cleaver. I understand that they are Australians—rich men home after a great many years, just to see the country and play a few rounds of golf."

"Oh, that's it, is it? Not exactly the class of people who frequent the Dormy House, unless things have changed very much since I was here last."

"I don't know about that, sir," James said. "But though they look Bond Street, Bond Street isn't all blue blood. If those men belong to our class, then I am very much mistaken."

Of course, sir, it isn't for me to criticize gentlemen who come down here ; but if those two are any class——”

Old James broke off abruptly, as if conscious that he was going too far. Before Cheriton could make any response, another man walked into the bar and asked the steward if he had seen a gentleman called Bradman anywhere about.

“ He's just gone out, sir,” James told him. “ Up to his bedroom, I think. There was another gentleman with him and I think he has gone into the billiard-room.”

The speaker was a young man, extremely good-looking in a slightly effeminate way, with easy, rather insolent manners and evidently on the best of terms with himself. But weak, Cheriton thought, almost unconsciously, as he noticed the lines of the mouth under a toothbrush moustache, and vain. He turned on his heel and left the bar without another word.

“ Then you don't know him, sir ? ” James asked.

“ I haven't the pleasure,” Cheriton said.

“ Haven't you, sir ? I think you told me just now as you was staying with his lordship.”

“ So I am. But I can assure you that I never saw that gentleman before. Oh, by the way, does he happen to be Mr. Andrew Canton by any chance ? ”

"That's right, sir," James smiled.

"But they told me he was in London."

"So he was, sir, but I suppose he come down from London this morning unexpected like. And I rather fancy that it was in the same car that brought the two gentlemen who have just gone out."

"Well, I suppose I shall meet him presently," Cheriton said. "Does he play much golf?"

"No, not much, sir. Fits and starts, as you may say. Be a good player, the professional tells me, if he wasn't so impatient, and easily discouraged. Too fond of running up and down to Town night-clubs and all that sort of thing. But there, sir, perhaps I am saying what I didn't ought to."

Whereupon, Cheriton changed the conversation and, a few minutes later, was on his way back to Seagrane Holt. He was a little disturbed in his mind to find that the Earl's potential heir was on what appeared to be friendly terms with two men whom Cheriton put down in his mind as real wrong 'uns. He remembered what Mrs. Marchand had said about those frequent visits to Town on the part of the young man, and now, after a lapse of some time, they seemed to have recommenced again. If Cheriton was any judge of men, those two individuals he had just encountered came from across the border line and there

was a strong probability that they had run down to Sandchester with some sinister object of which Andrew Canton was the centre. If this was so, Cheriton would make it his business to frustrate the plan.

But, meanwhile, there were other things to think about. He had to meet his kindly host, whom he found waiting for him on the broad stone terrace in front of Seagrane Holt, and welcomed him quite as cordially as he had expected.

He saw a big, powerful old man who looked quite the part he had been called upon to play, in his well-cut breeches and gaiters and rough Harris tweed jacket, a man in the prime of life with wiry grey hair, standing upright on his head, grizzled eyebrows and neatly trimmed short beard and moustache. He held out his hand and took Cheriton's in a powerful grip.

"Now, this is real kind of you," he said. "Don't you get thanking me for asking you down here, because the thanks are all the other way on. I have heard all about you from that lil' gel and how kind you were to her and her mother when they were living on sixpence a week and earning it. So you are a big man in your own way now, Mr. Cheriton, like your father was before you. And I know all about him."

"Oh, do you, sir?" Cheriton asked.

"Yes, I guess I do. I left the old country

when I was a kid a little higher than a bee's knee, but I never forgot I was a Briton, and the more I saw of the world and the older I got, the more proud I grew of the fact. You see, out in the States we got a lot of English papers and there was never a week passed that I didn't read one or two of them. That is how I knew all about Sir Charles Cheriton, K.C., and what a real big bug he was. Seems funny, don't it? There was me kind of taking an interest in a perfect stranger and never asking a single question about my own folk. But then, my mother died when I was a small nipper, and my father—well, he was what you call hot-stuff. Never spoke to me without a clout on the side of the head or an ugly word, and him ruining himself all the time with the horses. But I don't want to keep you here talking all day. Come inside, my boy, come inside."

It was good to be there having tea in that fine old hall with its priceless carpets and tapestries, and the figures in armour ranged round the open walls, dimly lighted by the rays of sunshine that filtered in through the painted windows. And, strangely enough, that unconventional old gentleman seemed to fit perfectly into his comparatively new surroundings. At a small table, Mrs. Marchand presided over the tea equipage with Evelyn helping. A rather silent Andrew Canton seemed to half

sulk in the background, and Cheriton did not fail to notice that he more or less scornfully refused the offer of tea and helped himself to a large whisky and soda from an old oaken buffet instead. Moreover, it occurred to Cheriton that the atmosphere between himself and the future owner of Seagrane Holt was inclined to be antagonistic. The young man's insolent blue eyes were turned from time to time on Evelyn with a certain admiration, but there was something lacking and behind it all a suggestion that Canton was bored with his surroundings. Presently he vanished altogether and was not seen again till dinner-time.

It was after tea was finished that Seagrane suggested an inspection of the house.

"I guess you would like to see over it," he said.

"Why, of course," Cheriton responded eagerly. "I know one or two English country houses, but I have never been a guest in a real show place like this before. There is nothing I should like better than to make its acquaintance."

Accordingly, Seagrane led the way through one room after the other, then upstairs into the long picture gallery and, after that, to a rambling storeroom almost in the roof. There he pulled up a beautiful specimen of a Carolean arm-chair and flung himself down in it.

"Now, you bring up another," he said.

"Light your cigarette while I smoke my pipe. There is some very fine stuff here, as you can see for yourself. But I have no use for it—there is more than enough of this sort of thing down below."

"This is quite a museum," Cheriton exclaimed. "I am no great judge, but in my father's prosperous days he was a collector of old furniture and carpets, and our house in Eaton Square was full of it. I should say that that carpet over there was Persian."

He pointed to a large carpet that lay more or less open on the floor and Seagrane nodded carelessly.

"I dare say," he said. "Pity for it to stay up here like this, isn't it? You see, I was thinking that it would look very nice on the floor of that cottage looking over the golf links. The cottage you are hankering after."

"Did Miss Marchand tell you that, sir?"

"She did. And she spilt a whole lot more. My dear boy, I know all about you and your ambitions and I sympathize with them. Made good, you did, when the old man handed in his cheques and left you to face the world alone. Brought up as you was to every luxury and never batted an eyelid nor asked a friend to help you when the smash came. Oh yes, the lil' gel told me all about it—thinks a pile of you, she does."

Cheriton's heart warmed to the old man and

he was conscious of a certain uplift which he would have been at some pains to describe. But then, he thought of one or two little hints that Mrs. Marchand had dropped, and reined in his feelings.

"That was very nice of Miss Marchand," he said. "I did have a pretty hard time of it for three years, but I always had a feeling that I was going to pull through."

"And you did, my boy, you did. Lord, I only wish young Andrew was made of the same sort of stuff."

"You must not be too hard upon him," Cheriton murmured.

"Hard upon him," the old man laughed. "Me! Just the other way on. When he first came here some months ago, I ought to have shown him that I am not made of soft stuff, though, between you and me, I believe that I have got quite a power of sentiment hanging around my ego somewhere. My boy, when I found Andrew Canton, he was getting a bare living in a City office, and giving no satisfaction at that. His employer told me that he should not have kept him for another fortnight. But then, one makes allowances for young people and that is how it was. So I brought him down here and let him know a bit too soon that, if all went well, he would be owner of this shack some of these days. And now I am wondering if I didn't make a mistake."

" Meaning that you have changed your mind, sir ? "

" Waal, not exactly that. You see, Andrew's father and me was partners. It is only twenty years ago and it seems like yesterday that I saw Major Canton for the first time. He had been in the British Army and quit it when Andrew was no more than a kid. So he left Andrew in England in the care of relatives, to come out West to make a fortune. He was a bit of a golfer and he played occasionally on the links where I was employed. And, somehow or another, I told him my story and he told me, in return, what I didn't know—that there were only two lives between me and the earldom of Seagrane. Not that the story thrilled me much, because I didn't see myself in England saddled with a grand place like this and no money to keep it up with. Waal, in my turn, I told Canton of a copper prospect I had hit up against in the far North-West on one of those excursions of mine. I was always a restless guy and times I had to throw up my work and go prospecting. But it was generally a waste of time, but I knew that there was a job always waiting for me when I got back to the golf club where I really belonged. Do I interest you ? "

" Very much indeed," Cheriton murmured.

" Waal, then, I will go on with the next chapter. I knew the stuff was there, but I

hadn't a bean to work it with and I couldn't see my way to run down to New York and talk pretty to those dollar princes in Wall Street. Then Canton told me that he had got a thousand or two locked up in England and he was prepared to put them into my scheme if I could prove to him that it was good. Waal, to make a long story short, I did, and it was good. But we had to fight for it. I don't mean that we had to fight the authorities, but some hoboes who had jumped my claim. We don't call it murder in those parts and the police are not kinder inquisitive. But I can tell you that it cost three lives before we put the fear of God in the heart of the gang who hoped to get away with what didn't belong to them. And then something happened —something I did which I have been ashamed of ever since."

"Please," Cheriton protested. "Don't tell me what you don't want to say. It is very flattering to be taken into your confidence like this, but you don't know very much about me, except what you have heard from a girl who knows nothing of the world and whose gratitude has led her to exaggerate what was little more than a mere passing politeness."

"My boy, I like to hear you talk like that," the old man said. "But I have taken a fancy to you—took a fancy to you as soon as I saw you on the terrace. But let it be as you say.

I did a wrong thing, a mean thing that will always haunt me. And it seemed to me that I had a chance of righting that wrong. That is why I sought out Canton's boy when I came back to England some years after my late partner was dead. I hoped to find Andrew as good a man as his father and—well—I haven't. It was all right at first, but when the novelty had worn off, Seagrane Holt seemed to lose its attractions. It was all running up to Town for three or four days and coming back, as you young people say in this country, looking like nothing on earth. I see now that I let that young man have too much money. Two thousand a year I allow him, which didn't seem overmuch to one who would have this place to call his home and over five million dollars to keep it up. Gambling it was, yes, and drinking as well. So I had another idea. I advertised for relatives and I found them. The sweetest lady and the dearest girl in the world. I brought them down here and, for the next two or three months, Andrew never went near London. And that made me mighty happy, because I dreamed a dream. God forbid it should turn out to be a nightmare."

"I think I understand," Cheriton said sympathetically.

"Yes, I see you do. I thought those two would fall in love with one another and that Andrew would see his way to mend his manners.

And so he did for a long time. Mind you, I still think that he has a sincere admiration for that lil' gel, and I know that if I put gentle pressure upon her, she would marry him if only out of gratitude. But should I be justified in doing this? It is all very well for Andrew to stay down here for two or three weeks, dancing attendance on the lil' gel and then flitting off to London for a long week-end and coming back bearing marks that are plain to an old man of the world like myself. I know that lil' gel. If she gave herself to a man, she would give herself entirely, and if he didn't act the man, she would break her heart. And here is Andrew running up and down to Town again now, just in the old way. I don't know what to do."

The brooding melancholy that Mrs. Marchand had spoken of was on Seagrane now and his mind seemed to be far away. It was as if he were communing with himself and utterly unaware that he was in the presence of another person. And all the time he was thrusting a knife into Cheriton and twisting it in the wound. It was almost as if he were warning Cheriton to build no hopes of a future happiness with Evelyn as his companion.

Then, as suddenly as it had come, the cloud rolled away and the old gentleman was himself again.

"But let's talk business," he said briskly.

" You want a place here where you can play your golf and get your exercise and work on your novels in between without any distractions. That's why you thought of the cottage by the links. Well, my boy, you can have it and welcome. I'll do it up as you like and you are welcome to borrow any furniture such as chairs and tables and carpets from the junk here. That lil' old bureau yonder, for instance. Just the thing to write at."

Seagrane pointed to an ancient Dutch, bow-fronted bureau in satin-wood, exquisitely inlaid.

" Yes, I know," he went on as Cheriton began to protest. " A lovely thing, but then Seagrane Holt is crammed with lovely things. Mrs. Marchand says there are far too many and she's right. Cayn't see the wood for the trees. If we sold half of it the place would be all the better. So you take what you like and welcome. I'll see to the rest. Electric light and all that. And find you a woman on the estate to see to your comfort. Plenty of time on my hands, so that it will be a pleasure."

A little later on Clifford rambled about the grounds and in the glorious gardens, whilst Seagrane wrote his letters. It was a perfect evening and only one thing was wanted to make it complete. And presently, that something emerged from the house and joined Clifford on the terrace.

She came with the sunlight gleaming in her

hair and filling her eyes with a golden glow. Evelyn at her sweetest and best. Evelyn the centre of an exquisite picture.

"So here you are," she said. "What a long talk you must have had with Lord Seagrane. I hope you are going to like him, for to my mind he is the dearest old man in the world."

"There I am inclined to agree," Cheriton smiled. "We seemed to hit it off from the first. I am to have the cottage by the links, and nothing would do but I must allow his lordship to furnish it from here. Lovely stuff."

"Yes, isn't it? Clifford, are we dreaming?"

"Meaning?" Cheriton asked. "Oh, I see. Shall we wake presently and find that I am still a mere policeman and you with your typewriter trying to make a living? Perhaps it might be in some ways better if we were."

"Clifford, what on earth do you mean?"

"Well, we were not entirely unhappy. Fairy godparents usually make some sort of restriction which has to be obeyed if we are to live happy ever after. This reservation very often takes the form of a marriage arranged by the godparents. Quite the Victorian tradition, Evie. Sorry, I wish I hadn't said that."

For Evelyn's face had suddenly flamed and something like a shadow dimmed her eyes for a moment. The scarlet flush deepened as Andrew Canton came down the terrace towards them. He was in a dinner-jacket suit without

overcoat, and was evidently on his way to dine somewhere abroad. A little way behind him came Seagrane, walking slowly with bent head.

"What are you two conspiring about?" Canton asked none too pleasantly. "It's past seven o'clock."

"Plenty of time to dress," Evelyn laughed. "Why are you so early adorned in the purple and fine linen?"

"Dining with some guys he has picked up at the Dormy House," Seagrane growled ominously. "Far better at home. But no gambling, mind. Remember, I have warned you."

Canton turned away with a scowl.

"Silly old fool," he muttered. "Just as if I couldn't take care of myself. Before that conceited ass Cheriton, too."

CHAPTER VIII

SEAGRANE certainly lost no time in carrying out his promise to Cheriton so far as the cottage was concerned. He waved a fairy wand which, in this case, took the form of a cheque-book and, immediately, a small army of workmen descended upon the place and, in the course of a week, had done marvels. It was an easy task to transform the two rooms downstairs into one large lounge-hall-sitting apartment, connected with the bedrooms above by a fine bit of oak stircasing looted from somewhere in the recesses of Seagrane Holt. The garden was cleared of its weeds and planted, the electric light installed.

Then from the Holt came beautiful furniture, pictures and hangings and everything calculated to make the cottage an ideal residence. In all this the old man delighted, because it gave him a chance of showing Cheriton what a fine business man he was, when once he applied himself to anything. There was only one drawback and that was in connection with the water supply.

As the cottage lay so low, the well in the garden had in it a tang of salt and, though

Clifford was prepared to make light of this, Seagrane would hear nothing of it.

"If the thing is worth doing at all, it is worth doing well," he said in his breezy way. "I am not going to see you settled down in that shack without a proper water system. I will see to it that it is connected with the Holt supply. It will take a week or two and, meanwhile, you must continue to be my guest. You can work here all day if you like and have your meals in the cottage if you are busy, but you must continue to sleep at the Holt. There is nothing else for it."

Clifford expressed his gratitude and there, for the moment, the matter rested. He was not to know, then, what tragic events hinged on this necessary delay.

"I don't know what I have done to deserve all this kindness," he said. "Only a few days ago we were absolute strangers."

"You were kind to the lil' gel," Seagrane replied.

He said it, too, in a voice that showed how deeply he was attached to Evelyn, though, when he spoke, that peculiar melancholy expression that Cheriton had noticed from time to time crossed his face and something like a sigh broke from him. And it seemed to Cheriton that he knew the reason why.

Outwardly, at all events, everything at Seagrane Holt was moving on oiled wheels. There was no shadow of coming trouble there, no

sinister cloud in the sky to suggest tragedy, but Cheriton, with that peculiar insight into things which is the prerogative of a novelist, seemed to sense that all was not well in that fair domain. And he knew, without being told, that Andrew Canton was at the bottom of it.

He knew that from the expression on Seagrane's face when he looked at the young man who was destined, some day or another, to take his place at Seagrane Holt. A something between sorrow and anger, a hesitation and a doubt as if he were asking himself if it was not yet too late to change matters.

And then there was Evelyn herself. Evelyn outwardly gay and cheerful and, apparently, on the best of terms with Andrew Canton. Whether she cared for him or not, it was hard to say, but as to that Cheriton had his doubts. There were times when those two laughed and talked together and were the best of friends, and then again signs that angry words had passed between them and something suggestive of a quarrel, only to be patched up when they were under the eye of Seagrane himself.

And all this puzzled and bewildered Cheriton and took a good deal of the savour out of the salt of life. He no longer doubted what his feelings towards Evelyn were and, without undue conceit on his part, he believed that she, on her side, was by no means indifferent. They had been close friends in the past when

poverty had been their common lot, and nothing could wipe out the recollection of those days even in the refined atmosphere of Seagrane Holt. And now that Cheriton was more or less settled down in his ideal cottage, working in perfect solitude at his new novel, he could not altogether suppress the thoughts that came into his mind from time to time.

They were not altogether loyal thoughts, he was bound to admit. He had come down there at Seagrane's invitation and been received with open arms. He had been treated with all the honour due to a man of honesty and integrity. He had had favours showered upon him and yet, here he was, in his solitary moments almost planning that which savoured of ingratitude.

And he knew perfectly well what would be the fate of Evelyn if she married Andrew Canton. He knew that she would be marrying a gambler and a waster and, given his head, and the passing of the years, Seagrane Holt and its glorious surroundings would be a thing of the past. And the instinctive knowledge that Seagrane himself shared these views did not render the situation any more tolerable. Still, Seagrane had told him definitely that Evelyn was intended for Canton and that their marriage would be the consummation of the old man's wishes. He had expressed a hope that his dream would not turn into a nightmare, and, so far as Cheriton could see, the

dread had not turned the old man from his purpose, so far. Still, there was Evelyn's happiness to consider and that must take precedence of everything else. There was only one thing for it, and that was to wait and watch in the hope that Canton would make some silly slip and cause the old man to reconsider his position.

Cheriton was pondering deeply over this one morning a fortnight later as he left his desk after two or three hours' hard work with the intention of going over to the Holt to lunch. He turned into the sand-dunes through a belt of cover which was a short cut to the house and where, in the old days, the late Earl had bred and reared his pheasants. Here was a narrow grassy ride, and, as Cheriton advanced along it, his footsteps made no sound on the thick grass beneath him. Then, suddenly, there came to his ears the sound of voices. He turned at a right angle to see, thirty yards in front of him, Seagrane talking earnestly to Andrew Canton. The old gentleman had a letter in his right hand which he was pounding angrily with his fist.

It was almost impossible for Cheriton to go forward and he feared that if he turned back he might be seen. He had no wish whatever to hear the conversation between the two, but, in the circumstances, it was unavoidable. Perhaps they would move on in a minute or two and then he could follow at a discreet distance. But

Seagrane showed no signs of stirring from the spot and his voice came clearly to Cheriton's ears.

"Is it true or not?" the old man shouted.

"I think I can explain," Canton stammered.

Cheriton could see that he was anxious and agitated and that his face was white with fear.

"Well, go on," the old man said harshly. "I will listen to anything in reason. But how are you going to explain away this letter? It came with the rest of the post after you had gone out this morning. You see who it is from? A money-lender. An infernal, thieving shark of a money-lender. Addressed to me by name. The writer says that you borrowed £300 from him three months ago, and when the bill came due, it wasn't met. Now, is that true or not?"

"Well, you see, it is like this——"

"Is it true or not?" the old man shouted angrily. "Did you go to this blackguard and obtain that money from him?"

"Well, in a way I did."

"In a way, indeed! £300 for three months and on the top of that half as much again for interest. Lord knows how much per cent. And you used my name."

"Not exactly," Canton stammered.

"What do you mean by not exactly? Do you suppose that man would have let you have a brass farthing if he hadn't known who I was and what everybody is aware I am doing for you? Now, don't be a liar as well as a profli-

gate. Only a few months ago you were glad to draw thirty shillings a week, and that was more than you were worth. And now £2,000 a year is not enough for you. You must get into debt over your gambling transactions."

"I—I assure you, sir, that, to oblige a friend——"

"What, more lies!" the old man cried, almost beside himself with rage. "Friend, indeed! Now, look here, young man, for the first and last time I want you to understand that I am in earnest. I know how difficult it is to make money—yes, and to keep it. I will pay this rascal and, if this happens again, out you go, neck and crop. And if I do close my doors to you, then you need not expect me to open them again. Now, you have got to make me a promise."

"Of course, sir, of course," Canton said with a sort of mock humility, that jarred on the listener. "Anything you like. This is going to be a lesson to me."

"Yes, but it wouldn't have been if I hadn't found you out. Now, listen; you are going to stay here for the next six months without going ten miles from Holt. No London for you till you know how to behave yourself. I haven't got another word to say; but if you break your promise, then, by God——"

Seagrane broke off abruptly and turned towards the house and Canton followed like a whipped dog behind him.

CHAPTER IX

CHERITON, once he had made a start on the new novel, was giving himself almost heart and soul up to it. He worked all the morning, with an interval for lunch and a round of golf afterwards, and then on again in the evening until it was time to dress for dinner and walk across the links to the Holt. So that his visits to the club-house and the Dormy House were few and far between. He was rather astonished and somewhat uneasy in his mind when he was putting his clubs in his locker one afternoon to see those two strangers coming close behind him and resume their coats and change their shoes. It was still intensely warm and bright, even though it was getting on towards the second week in May and, overhead, the clouds were gathering ominously as if a thunderstorm was not very far off.

"Looks like a change," the tall man remarked to Cheriton. "We could do with a few showers on the links. The greens are like glass and even a poor player like myself begins to fancy his drive on the hard ground."

"Yes, I had noticed that myself," Cheriton

said politely. "Are you gentlemen staying here long?"

"All depends," the shorter man said. "We are over here for a long holiday from down under, after being away from the old country for umpteen years, and there is a lure about this place that seems to hold me and my chum here. But I guess we will have to be back in Town in a day or two."

"Well, I don't think we will go out again this afternoon, Dan," the man called Bradman said. "I don't see myself caught out on the long hole in a waterspout. Best thing we can do is to toddle across to the Dormy House and see if we can make up a four at bridge. I know Canton is there, and perhaps this gentleman here will make up the table. Name of Cheriton, I think, sir. Isn't that right?"

"Perfectly right," Cheriton said. "But I am afraid you will have to excuse me. I have an appointment presently and I couldn't stay more than half an hour in any case."

It was polite fiction, of course, but Cheriton had not the slightest desire to sit down and play cards, even for nominal club stakes, with two men whom he regarded as sheer adventurers. It was not for him to say so, because it was no business of his and, after all was said and done, a golf club does not stand exactly on the same footing as a social one. Nevertheless, when once he had changed into his

ordinary kit, he strolled across into the Dormy House, which he would not have done if he had not heard that familiar allusion to Canton. He knew now what he had suspected before—that Canton's frequent absences from Holt in the evenings had been due to the fact that he was meeting these two suspicious individuals at the Dormy House. Canton played quite a good game of bridge, but Seagrane played a better and he, Cheriton, a better one still. It was strange, then, that Canton should care to turn his back upon the refined atmosphere of Seagrane Holt when he was in a position to command a game of bridge quite equal, if not superior, to that which he had been seeking three nights out of four, lately, at the Dormy House.

And Canton was one of those rash, headstrong players who might have been quite good had he not persistently over-called his hand and inevitably disregarded the rule for sitting quiet when holding cards which rendered any call impossible. And if there was anything underhanded going on here, it seemed to Cheriton that he might do worse than spend half an hour in the comfortable smoking-room of the Dormy House watching the play. So he lingered behind a moment or two and then strolled casually into the smoking-room, where he saw Canton and a stranger already seated at a table with Bradman and Cleaver.

Evidently, the stranger was no member of

the confederacy, for Cheriton knew him as an occasional visitor who came down from London for an odd day now and then as a break in his work at the Home Office. He was a certain Edward Stringer and quite beyond any sort of suspicion.

"It is getting very dark," Stringer suggested.

It was, as the speaker said, growing exceedingly dark. Great masses of clouds had piled up overhead and, every now and again, came the rumble of thunder.

"Oh, this isn't good enough," Cleaver said. "We shan't be able to see the cards. Turn on the lights."

A waiter coming into the room heard the request and immediately flooded the room with light. At that moment, a tremendous crash of thunder overhead seemed to shake the building, and a blaze of lightning caused the electrics to look no brighter than thin threads of flame.

"Better pull the blinds down, too," Bradman suggested. "Ah, that's better. Now then, let's cut."

The game began and Cheriton strolled over from the arm-chair in which he had thrown himself, and idly watched the play. There was no longer any reason for making an excuse for not playing himself, under a plea of an engagement, for the rain was now falling in torrents and could be heard lashing on the terrace outside.

"By the way," Cleaver said casually, as he

dealt the first hand, "what points are we playing?"

"Oh, five shillings," Canton said with equal carelessness.

"Five shillings a hundred?" Stringer remarked. "Well, gentlemen, I think that is rather more than I care to play."

Canton burst into an unpleasant laugh.

"Five shillings a hundred be sugared," he said.

"Five-shilling points. I never play for less."

"Then," Stringer murmured, "I am afraid I must decline."

"But you needn't," Canton pointed out. "You can play for threepence if you choose. I am quite sure that either of us three will be willing to carry you on our backs, and settle the difference. Don't spoil the game."

"Oh, well, in that case," Stringer said cynically, "go on. It won't be the first time I have played bridge in the same circumstances with first-class players who like to have heavy stakes on. I will call my corner half a crown if you like."

"Just one moment," Bradman said. "I left my cigarette case downstairs. I'll be back in a moment."

Bradman was back almost immediately and the game began. It proceeded with varying fortunes until the end came and a fresh cut for partners followed. This time Cleaver and Bradman cut together, and Cheriton drew a little closer to the table. He did not know,

exactly, what he expected to see, although he was not without suspicions. The cards were made, and handed to Bradman, whose deal it was, when Cleaver rose.

"Get on with it," he said. "Whilst you are doing so, I will step across to the telephone booth and send a call to the station about those cigarettes of mine. The parcel should have been here a week ago. Just a moment."

So saying, Cleaver crossed the room to the telephone booth which was situated in a sound-proof box in a sort of loggia in a distant corner. He had scarcely shut himself in when there came a vivid flash of lightning with its accompanying thunder, when the lights went out, leaving the room in utter darkness.

So unexpected was this that silence followed. Then the voice of old James, the steward, was heard as he fumbled his way into the room. By this time somebody had struck a match.

"I expect a fuse has blown out, gentlemen," James said. "I will see to it at once. Oh yes, sir,"—this in answer to Stringer,—"I know all about such things."

James vanished and for the next few moments the three players sat round the card table in silence. And then, as suddenly as it had gone, the light was back again.

"I think you will find that all right, gentlemen," James said as he looked in once more. "It was just as I thought. The electric current

fused the circuit on this floor. It was only a matter of putting in another wire."

Cleaver came across from the telephone box.

"Gosh, that was a nasty one!" he exclaimed. "I thought I was a goner when that flash come. Just as if somebody hit me on my listening ear with a sledge-hammer."

Cheriton made a mental note of the grammatical lapse, but said nothing. For the moment the veneer of gentility had gone.

"Well, it's all right now," Bradman said. "Come on, partner. My deal, isn't it?"

"Certainly," Stringer murmured. "Cards already cut and to your hand, Mr. Bradman."

"Of course," Bradman murmured. "That light business put it entirely out of my mind. Hope it won't happen again."

He proceeded to deal, and when the cards were sorted and the other three players ready, Bradman called one diamond. To this Canton on his left went one no trump. Cleaver and Stringer passing this call, Bradman called two diamonds, to which Canton responded eagerly with two no trumps. After a little hesitation, Bradman elected to try three diamonds, to elicit from Canton almost a yell of three no trumps. Cleaver shook his head, as did Stringer, and Bradman promptly doubled.

"Redouble," Canton stammered. "And £50 on the side."

For some time Bradman scanned his hand.

"I'll see you," he said at length "This is going to be some fun, surely. I like your pluck, Canton."

"And I admire yours," Canton smiled.
"Lead on, Macduff."

Standing quietly in the background, Cheriton scanned Canton's hand. On the face of it, there seemed to be every chance of Canton pulling off his redouble. But it was not quite impregnable, as Cheriton, with his intimate knowledge of the game, could see, unless there was some sort of support in his partner's hand.

"Mind, I never backed you," Stringer murmured.

"I wouldn't worry about that," Canton grinned.
"You sit pat and watch me sweep the board."

It was not entirely an idle boast. Cheriton noted that in Canton's hand lay :

Spades : Ace, 6.

Hearts : Ace, 9, 2.

Diamonds : Ace.

Clubs : Ace, Queen, Jack, 7, 6, 5, 3.

A one no trumper truly and, perhaps, two, but by no means a certainty unless there was some support on the other side of the table from Stringer. And the latter had said nothing. Then, when Cleaver had led his nine of diamonds, Stringer laid down his hand. There was one trick in it—the king of hearts.

"Another bet?" Bradman challenged.

"Yes," Canton snapped. "Double or quits."

CHAPTER X

IT would have been a mad enough declaration on Canton's part and a still wilder re-double. Cheriton, standing there casually looking on, could see that as he moved presently round the table and caught a glimpse of the cards that Bradman and Cleaver were holding between them. He shrugged his shoulders slightly as he moved in the direction of the window beyond the curtains of which it seemed to him that he could see a gleam of light. As he pushed these back, he saw a glimmer over the sea, then a flood of sunshine out of a sky that was rapidly clearing. The storm was over, and there was no reason now for the artificial light in the smoking-room.

To a great extent, Cheriton was no longer interested in the card play, though he was not surprised to hear a smothered exclamation from Canton and to see an ill-disguised gleam of triumph on the faces of the two strangers.

"Bad luck," Bradman commiserated. "I should certainly have gone two no trumps on that hand if it had been dealt to me. But, my dear chap, surely you were not justified in increasing your call. I took a certain amount

of risk in calling three diamonds, and if you had been wise, you would have left me in and—yes, perhaps doubled yourself."

"Oh, get on with it," Canton said impatiently.
" You can hold the post-mortem afterwards."

Then followed another deal and a declaration of three Spades from Cleaver, which resulted in game and rubber. A suggestion that there was time for another one was politely negatived by Stringer. He glanced out of the window to where the sun was shining and rose from his seat.

" No, thank you," he said a little icily. " I didn't come down here to play cards and I am sorry that I was unfortunate enough to be Mr. Canton's partner in that very audacious call of his. I see it is quite fine now, and after all this long dry spell, it will be possible to play on the links again in a few minutes. A great advantage of a sandy course. I think I shall potter round by myself for an hour or two."

" Well, in that case, I think we had better reckon up the spoil," Cleaver smiled. " Let me see."

He began to make a rapid calculation on the back of his scorer and threw it across to Canton.

" Will you be good enough to check that ? " he asked.

With a white face and trembling lip, Canton added up the figures that Cleaver had given him.

" Quite correct," he said in as steady a voice as he could command. " I owe you——"

"There is one little thing you have overlooked," Stringer interrupted. "And that is the fact that I am playing at half a crown a hundred, and you, Mr. Canton, are carrying the difference between that and five shillings a point. In other words, my total indebtedness amounts to a comparatively few shillings and you have to make up the balance."

Canton smiled a ghastly smile. For the moment he had forgotten this extra burden altogether.

"Oh, well," he said as carelessly as he could. "Just work out the difference, Cleaver, will you? I suppose it means another hundred or so."

"A good deal more than that," Cleaver declared.

The reckoning was settled at length and, with a casual glance at it, Canton pushed the paper into his pocket.

"Well," he said, "this has been rather a hectic afternoon for me. But then, if one didn't have these sort of experiences, bridge would not be the fascinating game it is. Of course, I haven't got all that money in my pocket. And if you chaps don't mind, I shall have to give you a cheque."

"Of course, my dear fellow, of course," Bradman said genially. "I only regret the necessity."

"I don't even happen to have my cheque-book in my pocket," Canton said. "You shall have it to-morrow. No, not to-morrow,

either, unfortunately. I have rather a pressing engagement which will probably mean that I shall be away for the night. But I shall be here the day after, and if you chaps are knocking about at lunch-time, the plunder will be there."

With that, Canton made what he hoped was a fine exit, and Cheriton followed him out on to the links. They walked side by side, together, in the direction of Seagrane Holt and, for some little time, no word passed between them. It was Cheriton who broke the silence at length.

"That was a mad call of yours," he said.

"Oh yes, perhaps it was. But any fool can be wise after the event. I suppose you saw my hand?"

"I did," Cheriton said. "And all that I could see in it were four certain tricks. And your partner's only re-entry card was the king of hearts. I have played a good deal more bridge than you have and I know a good deal more about it."

"I dare say you do," Canton sneered. "Mean to say you would not have gone one no trump on my hand?"

"Yes, certainly I should, holding four aces, to say nothing of that long string of clubs. But if my opponents had called two diamonds I should have left it in. And made five tricks straight away. Perhaps more. Or, alternately, I should have called three clubs, or even four clubs, because you had six tricks certain in

that suit if you had been left in, with three aces and another trick in hearts."

"Oh, what the deuce is the good of talking?" Canton cried. "The mischief is done now, and I haven't a bean to pay with. My next quarter's allowance isn't due for two or three weeks and I simply dare not ask the old man to advance the date."

Cheriton nodded. He knew perfectly well why Canton feared further to encounter Seagrane's wrath, for that conversation he had overheard in connection with the money-lender's letter came back to his mind significantly.

"And how are you going to pay those men?" he said. "You can't let three weeks or a month elapse when you are dealing with absolute strangers. How on earth did you come to be connected with them at all?"

"Well, it was like this," Canton said. "I ran against them in Town. It was at one of the night clubs."

"Oh, indeed," Cheriton said dryly. "Wouldn't it be rather more correct to say that they ran up against you? Don't you think it is more than probable that they followed you down here with the intention of robbing you at cards?"

"Oh, don't talk rot," Canton cried. "Chaps of that type! Anybody can see they are all right—rolling in it and all the rest of it. You can't deceive me——"

"No? For my part, I regard those two as

a pair of dangerous crooks. Don't forget I have had three years in the London Police Force, where it was my business to keep a special eye upon that type of adventurer. Oh yes, I know they look all right and generally speak all right. But I notice a lapse now and again that tells me a story. However, it is no use discussing that, because you have lost your money and, as far as I can see, speaking on the spur of the moment, there was nothing underhanded about it. And even if those men are what I think they are, it would take us months to prove it and then they would still maintain that you owed them some hundreds of pounds. And so you do."

"Yes, I am afraid that is right," Canton agreed. "Look here, Cheriton, can't you help me out? I simply dare not go to the old man and that money must be paid. I will swear to you if you will only act the pal this once, I will never touch a card again as long as I live. And directly I get my allowance I will pay you £400 back the same day. I can easily do that because the old man makes it a point that I should stay down here and give London a miss, so it will be easy enough for me to sustain life down here for three months on a hundred quid."

Cheriton shook his head resolutely.

"I am afraid I can't do anything of the sort," he said. "I don't say I couldn't find

the money, but I can see no reason why I should. My dear fellow, a very few weeks ago I was as poor as you were when you first came down here. No, I am afraid you must get out of it as best you can."

"All right, all right," Canton said desperately. "I dare say there are other men in the world who will see me out. In fact—yes, I am going to see one of them to-morrow. A man I am playing golf with all day at Sandwich and dining with him afterwards. That is why I shall be away from here to-morrow night. A chap called Stuart Landon. I dare say you have heard of him."

Cheriton responded to the effect that the name was a strange one to him and, a few moments later, they separated before the park gates at Seagrane Holt, Cheriton to go back to his cottage for an hour or two's work and Canton to fling himself down in the hall where he was still brooding over his ill luck, as he called it, when Evelyn came into the room.

"Why, what's the matter?" she asked. "You look as if some terrible misfortune had happened to you."

Canton made a decision on the spur of the moment.

"It has, old thing, it has," he cried. "Evelyn, I have made the most awful fool of myself. Mind you, I didn't mean to do it, but you know how these things happen."

"Yes, I know how they happen to you," Evelyn said a little sadly. "But what is the trouble? Gambling again?"

"Well, something like that," Canton admitted. "You see, it was just a game of bridge in the Dormy House. With those two chaps I told you about. The most wonderful hand you ever saw. And, of course, when one of my opponents doubled me, I redoubled. If it hadn't been for one card, I was within sight of a small slam. I can assure you, my dear girl——"

"Yes, I have heard it so often before," Evelyn said wearily. "And that one card made all the difference, of course. Andrew, don't you know that you are making all of us miserable and unhappy? And yet, when we came here first, Seagrane Holt was a sort of paradise. But how much did you lose?"

"Hundreds," Canton whimpered. "Look here, Evie, won't you try and talk the old man round? You could do it on your head."

"Yes," Evelyn said bitterly. "And have the same thing happen over again next week. You will never stop gambling while you have a penny in your pocket or someone to go to to make up your losses. I am tired of all these misunderstandings and troubles, which are entirely of your making. No, you need not speak. I am not going to do anything of the sort. If you haven't the pluck to face your benefactor, I won't."

CHAPTER XI

IT was characteristic of Canton's volatile nature that he showed no signs of the trouble in which he had plunged himself during the time that the party at Holt sat round the dinner table. He laughed and joked and was more or less the soul of the gathering, whilst Evelyn was quieter than usual and Cheriton was watching developments and Seagrane himself seemed to be lost in a fit of more or less moody distraction.

The dinner was drawing to an end and the cigarettes were lighted before Canton made the next move.

"That was a bit of a thunderstorm this afternoon," he said. "It was so dark in the smoking-room of the Dormy House that we had to play our bridge by artificial light."

Seagrane looked up with a scowl on his forehead.

"What!" he demanded. "Playing cards again? I thought you told me only a few hours ago—"

"Well, just a friendly game, you know," Canton said airily. "My dear benefactor, you don't call playing bridge for small stakes in the

friendly atmosphere of a golf club, gambling, do you? Surely you didn't mean that?"

"How much did you lose?" the man demanded sternly.

Canton lied without turning a hair.

"Lose?" he said. "How much do you suppose a man loses when he is playing three-pence a hundred? We only had three rubbers altogether, so you can judge for yourself."

It was a daring, audacious remark to make, seeing that at least two people sitting at the table knew how deeply Canton had committed himself only a few hours ago. But it seemed to suffice Seagrane, and when Canton realized that he had got away with it, his spirits rose proportionately.

"As a matter of fact, I have done with gambling," he said. "I shall never back another horse and never play cards for more than nominal stakes. That is the advice Stuart Landon gave me a long time ago, and he is one of the most level-headed chaps that ever stepped on Sandwich Golf Links."

"I should like to meet him," Seagrane said with grim humour. "Any friend of yours who is as sensible as that deserves encouragement. You had better ask him down here."

"Do you really mean that?" Canton asked delightedly. "Then I will. Topping chap, Landon. I heard from him this morning and he asked me to go over to Sandwich to-morrow

for a day on the links there. He wants me to dine with him afterwards and spend the night. And if it's all the same to you, sir, I should like to bring him back with me if he can come."

"Delighted," Seagrane smiled. "Bring your friend by all means and as many more like him as possible."

Dinner was finished at length, and presently Cheriton found himself strolling on the terrace with Evelyn. Mrs. Marchand was reading in the hall, whilst Seagrane was writing letters in the library. Canton had vanished somewhere. Not that the two on the terrace were in the least concerned as to his whereabouts.

"Clifford," Evelyn said suddenly, "what are we going to do about Andrew? Do you know that he is spoiling life for everybody in the house? Making everybody wretched."

"Yes, I know," Cheriton said almost under his breath. "And take care, Evelyn, that he doesn't spoil yours."

He spoke on the spur of the moment, without considering what he was saying, for the words had been almost forced from him. In the fading light, he could see how Evelyn had flushed and then how pale her face had grown again.

"It is so difficult, Clifford," she said, "so difficult. That dear old man! Was there ever anybody like him before? But I think he is beginning to realize that his scheme——"

She broke off abruptly and her face flamed again.

"Let me finish for you," Cheriton said gently. "He is beginning to see what a perilous thing it would be if the son of his old partner and the girl he loves so dearly were forced into one another's arms. That is what you were going to say."

Evelyn moved along by Cheriton's side.

"Well, we can put that on one side for the moment," Cheriton said. "Do you know, I feel like a traitor here and I think you can guess the reason why. But we can also put that on one side for the moment. Now, did you realize how deliberately Canton was lying to the old gentleman at dinner-time?"

"Oh, you know that, too, do you?" Evelyn cried.

"Of course I do. I was present at the Dormy House this afternoon when that game of bridge was in progress and—"

"And you know how much Andrew lost."

"Need I go into details, Evelyn?"

"No, because Andrew told me himself. I happened to come into the hall not long after tea and he was sitting there looking the picture of misery. When I asked him what was wrong, he told me. He was playing bridge with three strangers—"

"Well, let us say two strangers and a gentleman," Cheriton corrected dryly. "One of

them was all right and he came in merely to make up the table, but, unless I am greatly mistaken, the other two men were common swindlers. You see, after three years in the Detective Force, I flatter myself that I can tell the fraternity at a glance. Not that I detected anything wrong, because I didn't. So far as I could see, the money was honestly lost and honestly won. Mind you, it is just possible that those two men cut together by a trick, but I was not near enough to detect that. Anyway, they were playing for high stakes and side bets and, at the finish, Canton was some hundreds of pounds down."

Cheriton did not say anything to Evelyn as to the request Canton had made to him, from motives of delicacy, but she seemed to read the truth into his statement.

"And he tried to borrow money from you," she said. "Oh, don't deny it, because I feel certain. And, of course, you declined to listen to any such suggestion."

"I should have done," Cheriton said evasively.

"Ah, you mean that you did. Never mind. Andrew asked me to interpose between himself and Lord Seagrane, telling me bluntly that I could twist him round my little finger."

"And you refused, too?" Cheriton asked.

"I did, because I am getting sick and tired of the way in which Andrew is bleeding his

benefactor and breaking his solemn promises over and over again. And the barefaced lies he told to-night, knowing perfectly well that neither you nor I could contradict him. And there is another thing, Clifford. I am quite sure that Andrew has hit upon some way of raising that money. You saw how cheerful he was at dinner to-night, so different to what he generally is. Did you note the sort of challenge in his eyes as he spoke so lightly about playing bridge for threepenny points ? It was a defiance to us to betray him to the dear old man. I am afraid, Cliff, terribly afraid."

"Then you don't believe the story about this man Landon ? I mean that Canton is not going to Sandwich at all."

"No, Clifford. I think he is going to London on some sinister business which embraces the raising of funds to pay those men who won his money. And I dare not give the dear old gentleman even a hint of my suspicions."

"I quite see that," Cheriton said. "And my own position is exactly the same as yours. I couldn't approach the Earl and tell him what I saw in the Dormy House this afternoon. And yet I feel that I ought to do something. Anyway, I will wait and see. But if any harm threatens you, Evie, then it will be a different matter. But won't it be hard for Andrew to cover his tracks ? "

"Why should it ? He knows that he can

take one of the small cars and drive himself. He will probably start after breakfast when the Earl is in the library as is generally the case, and then drive alone to London. Spend the night there and come back here the next day with a message to the Earl from this Landon thanking him for his invitation and saying that his engagements will not permit him to come just yet, but that at some early date he will be only too delighted. Oh, it looks so simple."

It was a hopeless discussion altogether and Cheriton was glad to abandon it for something more personal. But it came back to him as he lay in bed thinking the matter out after the rest of the household was asleep. A few days more and he would be settled in his cottage altogether and his room in Seagrane Holt would know him no more. But twist and turn as he would, he could see no way out with honour and no loss of self-respect.

But he was up early in the morning and working in his cottage till he realized that breakfast would be a thing of the past at Seagrane Holt unless he hurried there.

When he arrived Seagrane had finished his meal and was already busy in the library. Of Canton there was no sign to be seen. An inquiry for him from the servant who waited at table elicited the information that Mr. Canton had come down early and had left the

house almost immediately in one of the small cars and driven off alone, ostensibly for Sandwich. A moment later Evelyn entered.

"Oh, I am so glad you have come," she cried, "for Andrew has gone, and the small Holbein in the gallery is missing, as I discovered quite by accident just now. What shall we do?"

CHAPTER XII

CHERITON looked up from his breakfast and did not fail to note the alarmed expression on Evelyn's face.

"What's that?" he demanded. "I don't quite understand. I will join you outside in a minute or so on the terrace and then we will talk the matter over."

"Well, it's like this," Evelyn said, a little later, as she and Cheriton moved up to the top end of the terrace, so as to be away from any possible listeners. "In one corner of the gallery is, or rather was, a small panel picture about two feet square, painted by Holbein. There is a story attached to the picture, connected with a one-time Countess of Seagrane who came from a prominent Dutch family. She was married when quite a child and, before she came to England and settled down at the Holt, she was painted by Holbein and, ever since then, the picture has hung in the spot where it is, or was. I don't know why, but from the first few days I was here that picture fascinated me. It was such a pretty, pathetic face and all the more alluring because there is a tragedy behind it."

"How did you find out all this?" Cheriton asked.

"Oh, from the family archives. They are in bound volumes in the library and I have read most of them."

"Does the Earl know anything about it?"

"No, he doesn't. He loves this place and everything belonging to it, but he is not in the least interested in his ancestors. He says they were a dissolute, idle, plundering lot and people he is not at all proud of. I don't think he would notice the Holbein was gone in twenty years."

"Perhaps not. But how came you to spot it?"

"Well, it was like this, Cliff," Evelyn said. "I loved that old picture and I traced most of them in the archives I was telling you about just now. And, as I told you, the picture of Anna, fourth Countess of Seagrane, particularly appealed to me. She died young, after a very unhappy life in which there was a lover and something like a tragedy. So I began to weave a story around her, part of which I have already written and I hope to finish it some day when I have time. I know that the portrait hung in its proper place last night, and when I came back from the bathroom this morning it had gone. I am quite sure that Andrew took it with him when he left just now."

"That is a serious accusation," Cheriton said gravely. "What makes you feel so certain?"

" Well, I was just coming back from feeding the doves when Andrew came hurriedly down the steps to the two-seater which was waiting for him. His golf clubs were already there and his kit-bag. He seemed a bit anxious to avoid me and that was because he was carrying, under his arm, a brown-paper parcel about two feet square, so I said nothing and, indeed, I thought nothing at the time. But in the face of what I have just told you, I am quite sure that the picture was hidden there. Now, my dear boy, what are we going to do about it ? "

Cheriton listened gravely to the story that Evelyn had to tell. He had not the slightest doubt whatever that the unhappy young man had adopted this means of paying off his indebtedness to the two strangers. No doubt, he had hit upon the scheme on the spur of the moment, feeling fairly certain that he could raise sufficient money on the picture to liquidate the debt at a minimum risk of exposure.

" Is the painting valuable ? " he asked.

" Oh yes, it is a Holbein in his best period. It is starred in the catalogue which is kept in the library, and it is suggested that it is worth two or three thousand pounds. And, mind you, Cliff, that catalogue was compiled thirty years ago."

" Yes, I quite see what you mean," Clifford said. " In other words, it has enormously

increased in value. Yes, I think you are right. But what do you expect me to do? You don't suggest that I should speak to the Earl about it?"

"Well, perhaps not yet," Evelyn said. "Because we don't know for certain. But isn't there any way of preventing that unfortunate young man from committing an act of crime?"

"I am afraid not," Cheriton said. "By this time, he has probably reached London if we only knew it. And he must know of some way of disposing of that picture or he would not have taken it. Mind you, I don't think he means to sell it. I should say that his idea is to pawn it, to raise enough money to pay his debts and redeem it later on. You know his sanguine temperament. Of course, the picture never will be redeemed unless Canton makes a clean breast of it to the old gentleman, which he is not in the least likely to do."

"Oh, it's dreadful," Evelyn sighed. "To think that he should so far forget himself! Cliff, can't you suggest anything? Can't you follow him?"

Cheriton shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

"Follow him where?" he asked. "My dear girl, that picture will be pawned before I can get half-way to London."

"But isn't it just possible that Andrew will call at Sandwich Golf Club on his way up? It only means making a slight detour. He

might do that so as to provide against any such contingency as his friend Landon calling him up here."

"If such a person exists," Cheriton said cynically.

"Oh, but I know he does," Evelyn said. "I have heard Andrew speak of him more than once. But can't you ring up Sandwich Golf Club and find out? Andrew may be there and, if he is, then you can speak plainly to him."

"A good idea," Cheriton said. "I will waste no time, but go across to the club-house at once and ascertain."

Without another word, he made his way thoughtfully across the links, thinking furiously as he went. Indeed, he had given the business of those bridge rubbers a good deal of thought after he had gone to bed on the previous night, and the more he turned it over in his mind the more sure he grew that, in some ingenious way, those two scoundrels had laid a trap for Canton, into which he had walked with his eyes open. But how had it been done? It would have been an easy matter for the strangers to cut together, but he could not for the life of him see how it had been possible to deal those hands under the eyes of one who was not only a fine bridge player himself, but also a late member of the Scotland Yard organization. If it was a pure accident, then it was just the sort of hand calculated to lure a desperate

gambler like Canton into making a fool of himself. With his excellent card memory, Cheriton could actually place those hands exactly as they were dealt and he did so subconsciously in his mind as he walked along.

More and more convinced was he that the whole thing was a cunning scheme which had been thought out carefully beforehand and taken advantage of, owing to the fact that the thunderstorm had caused the electric light to fail. And the mere fact that the game had been played openly in the card room at the Dormy House with a man of the highest integrity as the fourth of the party, gave the whole thing an air of open honesty that it would be hard indeed to controvert.

More than that, the game was played with two fresh packs of cards which the steward had brought in unopened, as Cheriton was in a position to know for himself.

But was the failure of the electric light in any way connected with the thunderstorm? Possibly it was, but then, just before darkness fell upon the room, Cleaver had gone across to the telephone box in the corner and, once shut in the sound-proof cabinet, it was possible for him to remove the lamp illuminating it and blow out a switch by means of pressing any bit of metal to the positive and negative poles of the terminals.

Yes, that was it. Or something like it.

And then again, before the game began Bradman had gone out of the room saying that he had forgotten his cigarettes. No doubt that was some part of the scheme, but, turn it over in his mind as he would, for the life of him Cheriton could not see how it was worked.

Still, there was plenty of time for that, and Cheriton resolutely swept the problem on one side, seeing that there was a much more pressing task before him.

Once he reached the club-house, he turned up the telephone directory and called up the Sandwich Links. It was a rather irritating delay, in consequence of cross-country communication, and more than two hours had elapsed since Andrew Canton had left the Holt before the familiar "hello" at the other end of the wire told Cheriton that he was through.

"Name of Cheriton," he said briefly. "I am speaking to you from Sandchester Club House. Does Mr. Landon happen to be there this morning? He is a member, I think."

"Hold on a moment," said a voice at the other end, "and I will inquire. . . . Are you there? No, Mr. Landon has not been here to-day. I don't think he is in Sandwich at all. One moment. No, he is not in Sandwich. The caddie master says he took his clubs away with him the day before yesterday."

"And nobody has been there this morning inquiring for him?"

"No, I am quite sure of that. You see, I am the steward speaking, sir, and I have been on duty ever since we opened to-day. If anybody had asked for Mr. Landon, he must have spoken to me."

Cheriton briefly thanked the speaker for the information, or rather the want of it, and turned away wondering what to do next.

His real inclination was to go straight to the Earl and tell him all about it. Really, it was beyond reason that Canton should behave like this, and have his tracks covered by two people who were under almost as great an obligation to the old man as was the delinquent himself. The odds were a thousand to one that Seagrane would never discover that the Holt had been deprived of one of its most priceless treasures, and, therefore, if he and Evelyn maintained silence, they stood almost as if they were accessories after the fact.

But before returning to the Holt, Cheriton turned into the Dormy House for a few moments' conversation with old James, the steward. It was a fine morning and the place was deserted, everybody being out on the links.

"Got many people staying here now?" Cheriton asked casually.

"No, sir; only those two gentlemen you know of and Mr. Stringer. We never have many people here in the middle of the week."

"No, I suppose you don't. I wonder if you

will do me a favour, James. I want to put through a trunk call and I will give you the number. It may take some time to get through; meanwhile I think I will go up in the billiard-room and knock the balls about."

Cheriton gave a fictitious number on a non-existing exchange to the old steward whilst he went upstairs to the billiard-room, which was on the same landing as the bedrooms, and there made a rapid inspection of the three out of four bedrooms which he knew must be occupied by the visitors. That belonging to Stringer he recognized at a glance, so that it had no concern for him. Neither did he glean much from the other two rooms, except that in an empty fire-place he picked up a crumpled screw of paper which, when it came to be unfolded, disclosed the fact that it had originally been the wrapper of a pack of Messrs de la Rue's playing cards. Cheriton smiled to himself.

"Now, what the dickens does this mean?" he said under his breath. "An absolutely clean wrapper and very recently removed from its contents. I should say that either Mr. Bradman or Mr. Cleaver turned this out of his pocket last night when he came up just before dinner. Um! I must go into this."

Cheriton lounged downstairs, presently, to be informed by James that the exchange could not be found, neither was there such a name in the telephone directory.

"I am sorry, I must have made a mistake, James," Cheriton said lightly. "That is the worst of dealing in names and figures from memory. However, it doesn't matter, because I can refer to my correspondence when I get back to Holt and telephone from there. Oh, by the way, James, have you got any second-hand cards? I want a pack or two for an experiment."

"No, sir, I am sorry to say I haven't," James replied. "My instructions are to use the same packs of cards three times and then send them to the Millstone Institute."

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter. Yes, I will take those two packs of cards that were used yesterday in the smoking-room. I mean the packs you brought in just before the thunder-storm. I suppose they haven't been used again?"

"No, sir," the steward explained. "There was no play last night at all."

"Then I will take those packs and pay the full price for them. And, look here, James, you need not mention anything about this."

James gave the desired assurance, and a few moments later Cheriton was crossing the links in the direction of the Holt. Directly he met Evelyn, she saw at once from the expression on his face that he had been wasting his time.

"Well?" she demanded. "Well?"

"I wish to goodness I could say it was well," Cheriton said, with a shake of his head. "I got on to Sandwich, only to find, as I expected, that Canton had not been near the place. I could not have spoken to Sandwich less than two hours after he had left here and, by that time, he would be in London. Moreover, his friend Landon is not at Sandwich, because he is playing elsewhere. At any rate, he had taken his clubs with him."

"Oh dear," Evelyn cried. "What shall we do now?"

"Nothing," Cheriton said curtly. "The only thing I can see for it is to wait till Canton comes back to-morrow and accuse him point-blank of having stolen the picture. We shall know at once from the expression on his face whether he has been successful in Town or not, because he will certainly not be in a very amiable frame of mind if he has failed to raise enough money on the Holbein to pay those scoundrels. Mind you, Evelyn, there are lots of pawn-brokers and art dealers in London who know their business and who would not hesitate for a moment to advance anything up to a thousand pounds on that picture. They would recognize its genuineness at a glance and hand over a cheque for a sum of money bearing a big rate of interest, always with the off-chance that the painting was not redeemed, in which case it would be a remarkable bargain for them.

What I mean is, that directly Canton with his easy assurance went into the shop looking like a man of means, but obviously hard up for money, business would be done at once. And no questions asked, either. Scores of our aristocracy sell pictures under the rose, especially in these hard times. Mind you, there is just a chance, a mere shadow of a chance, of my being able to prove that Canton was swindled out of that money. But it will take time, and goodness knows where those two adventurers will be before I have reached a solution. If they are going to stay down here a fortnight, I think I shall be able to wring the money out of them and compel Canton to get the Holbein back again."

"But would he do it?" Evelyn asked.

"I should take jolly good care that he did," Cheriton said grimly. "It would be my business to hand the money back to him, telling him that we had discovered exactly what he did, and insist upon going up to Town with him and having the Holbein handed over to me so that I could bring it here once more. Meanwhile, we can do no more than wait and see."

And with this, Evelyn had to be content.

The day dragged slowly on, with Cheriton brooding over the problem of the card scene and the wrapper which he had obtained from Cleaver's or Bradman's bedroom. He sat working this out for an hour or two in the seclusion

of his cottage, using certain information that he had acquired during his three years at Scotland Yard, in an endeavour to discover whether or not those cards were marked. But the snag that obtruded itself across the stream of every flow of thought lay in the fact that those two packs of cards had come out of James' storeroom and that neither of them had been opened until the steward himself had placed them on the table. There was no getting over that.

And yet the packs looked different. They were the same size, the same class and, obviously, from the same makers : de la Rue's, beyond the shadow of a doubt. And yet, in some way, they were subtly different. Different designs on the backs, of course, as is essential in bridge cards or any game where two packs are used; but in the case of one deck a sort of greasiness on the backs that shone streakily when held slantingly to the light. With the aid of a powerful microscope which Cheriton had used professionally in the old days, he could make out little waves of something that looked like wax—very, very finely drawn strands of wax, with here and there a sort of blot which felt greasy to the touch. In the ordinary way this would not be noticed, as the lively pattern on the back of the cards hid these tell-tale marks, but under the microscope they stood out clearly enough.

Now, how, in the name of fortune, had these things got there? Cheriton asked himself. They could not have been there when the pack was opened, and Cheriton had seen that operation himself. Moreover, it was equally strange that the other pack showed no such signs, however closely Cheriton looked. He would have to send the peculiarly marked pack to Scotland Yard for scientific examination, finger-prints and the like, in which case it might be possible to trace the identity of both Bradman and Cleaver. This might necessitate sending photographs of the finger-prints to New York, which would take time, but Cheriton was not going to be deterred by that. It was a fascinating mystery which might be used profitably in some future story of crime, and Cheriton was not inclined to forfeit that opportunity. And, in the meantime, he would have to possess his soul in patience.

Seagrane Holt was a fairly early house and eleven o'clock at night saw the household abed. But not to sleep so far as Cheriton was concerned, for he wanted to sketch out his work for the next day or two, so he lay in his pyjamas with a shaded light over his bed whilst he turned on his side, pencil and note-book in hand, jotting down ideas as they came along.

It was a fascinating and absorbing business, and time passed rapidly until Cheriton was aroused by the clock over the stables striking

the hour of one. He was about to extinguish his light when the silence was broken by two dull thumps which seemed to come from the library below, over which his bedroom was situated. Once again came the dull thuds and Cheriton jumped out of bed and made his way to the door. The bumps had ceased by this time and a sort of purring hiss followed. To the alert ear of the trained detective the sounds were ominous enough.

Beyond all shadow of a doubt burglars were at work in the library. Moreover, Seagrane's safe was situated there and it was not a particularly efficient one, as Cheriton had noted on more than one occasion. There was no weapon handy and Cheriton regretted the fact. But a heavy poker in the grate afforded an excellent substitute, and Cheriton grasped it as he stole out of his room and softly crept down the stairs only to see that Seagrane, evidently also aroused by the noise, was in front of him.

Seagrane had switched on a stair light and was, like Cheriton, clad in pyjamas. From under the library door Cheriton could see a thin gleam of illumination, evidence of the fact that the thieves there had turned on the lights. Before Cheriton could warn Seagrane that assistance was at hand, the latter had flung open the door of the library and challenged the marauders boldly.

"Who are you and what are you doing

here?" he demanded. "And what are you up to with that safe? Ah, would you?"

The last words came with a snarl as Cheriton flung himself down the stairs. If the burglar was armed, as was sure to be the case, then Seagrane was taking his life in his hands. Cheriton could catch the beginning of a struggle and then the sound of a shot and the fall of a body.

As Cheriton burst into the library he saw Seagrane prone and silent on the carpet and a masked man grabbing at a litter of papers on the floor. He turned as Cheriton hurled himself forward, and made for the open window. Cheriton grabbed him by the hand for a moment before he wrenched himself free, leaving a fragment of rubber glove behind him. Seagrane lay there, ominously still.

CHAPTER XIII

IT was some hours later before Cheriton was able to visualize in a proper order the tense events that happened in the library at Holt. He just remembered, subconsciously, that he had been too late to see what had taken place between Seagrane and the midnight intruder, but in time to grapple with the man before he could get away. And in so doing he was taking a certain risk, because the burglar still had an automatic in his hand and it was only the sudden appearance of Cheriton and his quick rush that had saved him from the same fate as the poor old man, lying silently there, evidently at his last gasp.

With a dexterous twist and turn, Cheriton was upon the man and had grasped him by the right wrist with a peculiar grip that he had learnt in the course of his police training. Then they had swayed to and fro towards the long, central window of the library that opened on to the terrace, after which the murderous assailant had managed to break away, leaving the torn rubber glove behind him and, what was more important, his revolver, before he dived headlong through the curtains and, by means of the open window, into the night.

It was only that truly tenacious grip which came near to dislocating the ruffian's wrist that had compelled him to drop his revolver and fight desperately for freedom. In the struggle his mask had not fallen off, and Cheriton was bound to confess to himself that he had the vaguest idea as to the general appearance and size of the intruder.

But, of course, all that came back to him later on. Meanwhile, he had to act, and act promptly. And it was here that his three years' training at Scotland Yard stood him in good stead. He bent over the unconscious form lying on the carpet and saw that poor Seagrane was past all surgery. He had been shot through the throat and, evidently, the bullet had severed his spinal cord at the top of the neck. After that, Cheriton gave one glance round the room, noting the papers scattered about outside the open safe and then he began to act.

A deathly silence reigned over the house. It was quite evident that nobody else on the premises had heard the fatal shot fired. In a way, this was something to the good, for, just then, the less confusion and interruption the better. Locking the library door was preceded by an examination of the big Persian carpet for something that might be a clue. But beyond the automatic lying there, which Cheriton did not even touch, there was nothing except a round object about the size of a half-crown and

perhaps four times as thick, that seemed impressed into the carpet close by the weapon. Cheriton stooped over this and very gently detached it from the strands that held it in place. It was a sort of wax medallion and might have borne some kind of imprint, save that a heel had evidently trodden it flat, the sort of smooth heel that leaves no characteristic mark behind. Possibly the object had been there before and as a clue was valueless. But all the same, Cheriton dropped it more or less absently into the pocket of his pyjamas before he turned the key in the lock and made his way through the hall to an alcove beyond where he knew that the telephone was installed. Without delay, he called up Fakenham Police Station, that being the nearest constabulary centre, and in a few moments was through.

"Hello, hello," he said. "Is that Fakenham Police Station? Oh, it is. Anybody listening?"

This was an intimation to a curious operator likely to be in search of information.

"That's all right," the voice at the other end said. "I have seen to that. Who is it speaking?"

"My name is Cheriton," Clifford responded. "I am a guest of Lord Seagrane's and I am speaking to you from Seagrane Holt. His lordship was murdered a few minutes ago and I was just fifty seconds too late to see the crime committed. Can you send over an Inspector at once?"

"I am Inspector Shallock," the voice said. "I will be there in twenty minutes, bringing a couple of my men. Would you mind seeing that the room where the crime was committed is kept clear? I will bring the Police Surgeon, too, unless you have—"

"There has been no time," Cheriton said. "There is not a soul in the house awake except myself and I don't propose to alarm anybody until you have arrived. Meanwhile, I have touched nothing and have also taken care to turn the key in the library door, and put it in my pocket. You ought to be able to find a clue if there is one, before there is any occasion to wake the servants. Come up to the front of the house quietly and I will be waiting downstairs in the hall to let you in."

There was no more to be said, so Cheriton solemnly climbed the stairs to his bedroom, where he proceeded to dress himself. As he flung his pyjamas on the floor, the wax disc dropped out, and quite casually Cheriton picked it up and threw it into a drawer, where it lay amongst his collars. Then, almost before he had finished, he heard sounds outside, and presently he was opening the library door to admit Shallock and his men.

"You behaved very discreetly, Mr. Cheriton," the Inspector said. "Most men would have lost their heads over a discovery like that. It was the best thing you could have done, not to

arouse the household. That would have meant half a dozen people ranging about all over the library and mixing their foot-prints and finger-prints with those of the murderer."

"I don't think you will find any finger-prints," Cheriton said. "But perhaps I had better explain. I had been working in my bedroom overhead till very late—up to one o'clock, in fact—when I heard suspicious noises down in this room. I got out of bed and went out on the landing, only to discover that Lord Seagrane was in front of me. He entered the room before I could catch him up and immediately challenged the intruder. It was a reckless thing to do, but Lord Seagrane was a man of extraordinary courage and afraid of nothing. He must have made a rush at the intruder, who shot him in his tracks just before I could come on the scene. He would have shot me too, only I used a police dodge and closed with him with that wrist grip you probably know of and forced him to drop his weapon. Almost at the same time, I tore his rubber glove, which gave way, or I believe I should have had him. However, unfortunately, I didn't, and he plunged headlong through the window, which was open at least four feet, and vanished. There is the automatic and there is the glove. The mere fact of the glove being there makes me feel certain that you won't find any finger-prints. The automatic may help you."

Inspector Shallock regarded Cheriton approvingly. "Very good indeed," he said. "You might have been a policeman yourself."

"Well, as a matter of fact, I was," Cheriton said.

"Oh yes. Come to think of it, I have heard of you. You used to be connected with Scotland Yard, didn't you? Left it to turn novelist. I was at the Yard yesterday and I was talking to a man named Merrick about it. Your Inspector, wasn't he?"

"Yes, and I was his sergeant. But don't you think we are wasting time, chatting like this?"

Shallock accepted the reproof and set about a thorough search of the library. But there was nothing to be seen and no sign of a clue, so that Shallock was bound to confess presently that he was beaten. He shook his head gravely.

"Evidently a premeditated affair," he said. "And cunningly worked out. I have done all I can. Before I came here, I left instructions to have every police station within fifty miles warned and a special eye to be kept on anything suspicious in the way of a car. You see, Mr. Cheriton, I am convinced this is no local business. The burglar came down here for some specific purpose, probably travelling in a two-seater with the car hidden under cover of darkness not far off, and the confederate hanging around the house in case there should be an alarm. Now, how long is it, do you think,

between the time that the shot was fired and your getting us on the telephone?"

"Certainly not more than eight minutes," Cheriton said.

"Well, that is good, anyway. Within ten minutes we were calling up police stations all round the neighbourhood, which means that the murderer could not have had more than ten minutes' start at the very outside. All I can do now is to lock up this room again and seal it. Meadows, fasten those windows."

Shallock gave the order to one of his subordinates, and a few moments later the police force was in the hall.

"I will search round the grounds with my men to see if we can pick up any foot-prints," the Inspector said. "Not that I hope for much in that direction, because the ground is dry and the murderer has only to cross the terrace and let himself down on to the drive below. Then he would make his way down the avenue into the main road where his car was waiting for him and get back to London as fast as possible. I am quite sure these chaps came from Town. Now, Mr. Cheriton, if you don't want to accompany us, I will say good night to you. I shall be over again the first thing in the morning to see if anything has turned up. And I must leave you to acquaint the family here with the news of the tragedy. A very sad business indeed. I only met the Earl once, and it

seemed to me that he was the sort of man not to have an enemy in the world. Oh, by the way, as you are a friend of the family, do you know if his lordship kept any valuables in the safe? It is open, as you saw, with papers scattered all over the floor. But I don't suppose that man was after papers. A big sum of money or jewels."

"There are no family jewels whatever," Cheriton said. "I happen to know that. The late Earl sold every one of them. He was a noted spendthrift and gambler, and when he died there was practically nothing left that he could turn into money. Not even an ounce of old plate. My poor old friend never carried much money or had much money about him. He paid everything by cheque. And if there was five and twenty pounds in that safe, I shall be very much surprised."

"All this complicates matters," Shallock said thoughtfully. "But surely there must have been some object of outstanding value in the safe that brought that ruffian down here. Any-one can see at a glance that it wasn't an amateur job. However, it is no use wasting time talking about that. As I said before, I will be over here first thing in the morning and, meanwhile, I will arrange with the coroner about the inquest."

With that, Inspector Shallock took his leave and Cheriton went sadly upstairs again to his bedroom.

CHAPTER XIV

HE threw himself down on the bed and tried in vain to sleep. He lay there until daylight and he heard the servants, who were now moving about the house. Outside, the birds were singing in the gardens and now and then a blithe whistle came from one of the hands engaged amongst the flower beds. There were sounds, too, of cheerfulness amongst the domestic staff, till Cheriton could stand it no longer. He rose and bathed and shaved and then went out into the park, where he stayed till nearly nine o'clock before he returned to the cheerful south dining-room where breakfast and Evelyn awaited him.

" You are out early," she said. " I thought I was the first up. But where is the Earl ? He ought to have been down an hour ago. As I came past his room, I didn't hear a sound. It is not often that he sleeps so late."

There was nothing for it but to tell the truth, not that it needed much preparation on Cheriton's part, for Evelyn, looking up into his face, saw the deep shadow in his eyes.

" Is there anything very wrong, Cliff ? " she asked.

"Very wrong indeed, my dear," Cheriton said sadly. "Evelyn, you must prepare yourself for a great shock."

"Not the dear old man," Evelyn cried.

Very slowly, Cheriton shook his head.

"I am afraid so," he said. "It is terrible."

"But impossible. When? Where? How did it happen? And all the house going on as if nothing out of the common had taken place. Why wasn't I told before?"

"Because it was considered necessary not to alarm anybody," Cheriton explained. "You see, I found the—the body—"

Evelyn gasped and all the colour drained from her cheeks. "Go on," she murmured. "Tell me everything."

"The poor old gentleman was murdered," Cheriton said in little more than a whisper. "There were burglars in the library and by some unfortunate chance he heard them. I heard them, too, and I was going down to investigate when I saw that the Earl was in front of me. Then a shot was fired, and when I entered the library, Seagrane was lying dead on the floor. I was almost in time to capture the man; indeed, we had a struggle before he slipped a glove off his hand and got away through the open window. And then, my dear girl, when I realized what had happened, instead of rousing the household, my police training came uppermost and I telephoned to the authorities at

Fakenham. When you innocent people were asleep last night, the police were actually in the house. They may have captured the miscreant by this time, because every station for miles round was warned within ten minutes of the crime. The poor old man lies in the library, the door of which is locked and the key is in the possession of the police. I am going to ask you to break this news to your mother. Tell her what has happened and warn her that the authorities will be here shortly and they will probably want to cross-examine every servant who slept here last night. It will be more or less of a formality, of course, but he is certain to do it."

"Very well," Evelyn said, the tears running down her cheeks. "I will go up to my mother's room at once. Meanwhile, you had better be going on with your breakfast."

"Breakfast!" Cheriton echoed. "As if I can eat a mouthful. I have seen one or two ghastly tragedies in my time, but nothing that has upset me like this."

It was after ten o'clock before Shallock returned with his men and, by that time, the blinds had been drawn and a mournful silence brooded over the Holt. It was Mrs. Marchand that Shallock first asked to see.

"I am very sorry to trouble you, madam," he said. "Of course Mr. Cheriton has told you by this time what happened last night. I want,

with your permission, to ask you a few questions and then to see the indoor servants, one by one. There is no occasion for them to be unnecessarily alarmed, because I am convinced that none of them knows anything about the tragedy. Now, madam, if you please. You have been acting for some considerable time as the late Earl's housekeeper. In that capacity, you would know all about his habits——”

“They were very simple,” Mrs. Marchand said, with an understanding smile. “He was one of the most open men I ever met. And so long as everybody about him was happy and comfortable, he cared little for himself.”

“Quite so. But that is not precisely what I meant. You have heard, of course, that when we went into the library last night we discovered that the safe had been broken open and that papers were scattered all over the place. Now, to your knowledge, did the Earl keep any considerable sum of money in the safe? Or valuable securities, or anything of that sort?”

“I am quite sure he didn't,” Mrs. Marchand said. “I have seen that safe left open for hours at a time and I know that all the Earl's securities were held by his bankers. The only thing of value in that safe was his lordship's will, and that he made himself not very long ago and had it witnessed by the butler and cook. I know this because he told us that if

anything happened to him we should find his will in the safe."

"And this will, madam. Do you happen to know anything of its contents? The chief beneficiaries and so on."

"The estate and the main portion of the Earl's fortune go to his adopted son, Mr. Andrew Canton. Then there are legacies to myself and my daughter, and others to old servants who have been on the staff for years."

"Is Mr. Canton in the house just now?"

"Why, no," Mrs. Marchand said, rather startled by the question. "Surely you don't—"

"Suggest anything," the Inspector smiled gently. "Not for one moment. But it is my duty to explore every avenue, because one never knows where a single question may lead."

"No, Mr. Canton is away just now," Mrs. Marchand explained. "He went off yesterday morning early to play golf at Sandwich with a friend of his. But he will probably be back to lunch and then— But good gracious, he was going to bring back the friend with him to stay, and probably he does not know of the awful thing that has happened here. If you will excuse me for a moment, I will go and remind Mr. Cheriton of this and get him to telephone to Sandwich and let Andrew know everything."

Mrs. Marchand flew into the morning-room where Cheriton was waiting on events and in a

few words told him what was required. Just for the moment Cheriton was rather taken aback.

" You'll telephone to Sandwich, won't you ? " Mrs. Marchand asked. " We couldn't possibly have a stranger here just now."

" Of course not," Cheriton agreed promptly. " Leave it to me and I will see what can be done."

As a matter of fact there was nothing to be done. The futility of calling up Sandwich in the face of Cheriton's knowledge was plain on the face of it. He would have to state presently, in quite a casual way, that Canton was not at Sandwich and that he was not bringing a friend to Seagrane Holt, and on this latter fact he could gamble on a certainty, seeing that Canton had not been near Sandwich. Moreover, Canton, with poor old Seagrane's warning still in his ears, would lose no time in returning to Holt directly his sinister errand to London was successfully accomplished. Neither was there much chance of Canton picking up information concerning the tragedy by the way. At the very earliest the story could only reach the mid-day editions of the London evening papers and no doubt by that time Canton would be on his way back to Holt.

" Thank you so much, Clifford," Mrs. Marchand said gratefully. " I was quite alarmed when the Inspector asked about Andrew."

"But he has to ask about everybody."

"Yes, I suppose he has. Still, it is very upsetting."

Mrs. Marchand went back to the Inspector and Cheriton waited patiently on events. It was a long and dreary vigil, but at length Shallock emerged from his examination with a moody brow.

"I can't make top nor tail of it," he confessed. "Fairly baffled I am. This is a case for Scotland Yard if ever there was one. I shall advise the Chief Constable, Major Mills, to invite the assistance of London. The man I should like to get down here, if possible, is my old friend Inspector Merrick."

"And my late chief, remember," Cheriton smiled. "One of the old bulldog breed, but not quick in the uptake, as the Scots say. By the way, is the inquest fixed for to-morrow?"

It was some time after lunch when Canton put in an appearance. He seemed greatly agitated and disturbed, having picked up news of the tragedy when stopping on the way home for petrol.

"This is a pretty business," he said to Cheriton. "Any sign of a clue to the assassin so far?"

"None," Cheriton said briefly. "By the way, Inspector Shallock was asking for you when he was questioning the staff."

"As if I could tell him anything!"

" You will be asked to account for your movements during the last twenty-four hours like the rest of us. In fact, you'll have to."

Canton fairly gasped. The colour left his face and his lips held a tinge of blue. Then he recovered himself.

" No trouble about that," he swaggered.

CHAPTER XV

CHERITON ignored this characteristic gesture on Canton's part. He could see that the latter was badly shaken.

"Well, that's all right," he said. "But you quite understand why every person in the house will have to account for his or her movements within the last twenty-four hours."

Canton took a new line altogether.

"Now, look here, Cheriton," he said. "You don't like me and I am not particularly fond of you. But that is no reason why we should quarrel over this business."

"Quarrel?" Cheriton echoed. "What about?"

"Just as if you didn't know what I mean. We are both after the same object, though I need not give that object a name. The old man had certain plans for me and I was quite prepared to follow them when you came bobbing along to spoil everything. I may be a fool, but I am not such a fool as you think. I know what you are after, because I happen to have a pair of eyes in my head and it doesn't require much vision to see a hole through a ladder."

"I think that will do," Cheriton said quietly. "Let us keep to the point. You have been

away from here for forty odd hours, just at the time when your presence was most needed. You went down to Sandwich with the intention of playing golf there, and it was understood that you were going to bring a friend back with you. That was the idea, wasn't it ? "

" But I couldn't," Canton said, perhaps a little too eagerly. " Landon was unable to join me and—"

" I should not pursue that line if I were you," Cheriton interrupted. " Because it is likely to lead you into all sorts of trouble. As a matter of fact, when I had time to think after the tragedy happened, I telephoned to Sandwich to inform you of what had taken place. And they told me you hadn't been near the Golf Club and, moreover, that your friend Landon had taken his clubs away a day or two before without giving any date for his return. Now, of course, I am not concerned with your comings and goings and it doesn't matter twopence to me why you deceived the poor old man into believing that you were going to Sandwich when, in reality, your destination was somewhere else. What that destination was and what secret mischief you were up to I am not in the least curious to know. But you weren't at Sandwich and you didn't spend the night there with your friend. I am merely warning you that the police will certainly want to know where you were last night, and if you tell them a lie, however

innocent it may be, you are simply asking for trouble."

The truculent expression faded from Canton's face and he regarded the speaker with the air of a schoolboy who has just been caught out in some piece of mischief.

"Oh, very well," he said sulkily. "I suppose I have got to thank you for that, anyhow. Fact of the matter was I had a pressing reason for spending yesterday and last night in London. It was private business on my part and I don't see how it concerns the murder in the least."

"There I am inclined to agree with you," Cheriton said. "All I am doing is going out of my way to warn you. And with that, there is no more to be said."

Nevertheless, it was a palpably uneasy Canton who strolled away, leaving Cheriton to his thoughts. Not that he was left in solitude long, for, within a few moments, Inspector Shallock arrived at the house, together with a tall, iron-grey man, whose moustache and general bearing bespoke the military type of the old school. This individual was introduced to Cheriton as the Chief Constable, Major Mills.

"I am very pleased to meet you, Mr. Cheriton. I understand from Shallock that, until recently, you were a member of the Scotland Yard Detective Force. In that case, you ought to be able to help us. When this business was brought to my notice, I was particularly struck

by Shallock's description of the way in which you kept all the facts away from the household until after Shallock was on the spot. A most mysterious affair altogether. And no clué."

" Except the automatic," Cheriton pointed out.

" Well, yes, there is that. We have had a good look at that and discovered that it is of American manufacture. There is a private mark on it which probably represents a number in the books of the American company who made it. It may be possible, through these marks, to trace the actual purchaser. But it is going to be a long business and, meanwhile, we have nothing to go on. Can you suggest anything ? "

" I am afraid I can't," Cheriton said candidly.

" But what about a car ? I mean, presuming the murderers came in a car ; have you any trace of it ? "

" Not one," Shallock interposed. " All the patrols were out directly we got the alarm, but it seems that the roads last night, for miles around, were absolutely deserted between twelve and two. More than that, I have had a talk with the village constable who was out all night. It appears that Sir Israel Benstein, the great bullion merchant whose property adjoins Lord Seagrane's had been losing from his covers large quantities of pheasants' eggs. These have been stolen in the night by thieves and, when the case was reported to me, I gave Beccles, that is the local man, orders to hide in the wood

and see if he couldn't identify the thieves. He told me he went out last night shortly after ten and didn't get back to bed much before daylight. The cover in which he was hiding was within a quarter of a mile of Seagrane Holt, and if any car had come and gone within a mile between the hours of the time when Beccles was on duty, he would certainly have heard it. And he is absolutely sure that, after eleven o'clock and the moment he returned to his cottage, not a single car went along the road. You see, Mr. Cheriton, how much more difficult it makes it for us."

"That is pretty obvious," Cheriton said. "I feel pretty sure myself that the murderers used a car, but the evidence of your man seems to knock that on the head altogether."

"And what do you suggest now?" Major Mills asked. "A crime of revenge, perhaps. You see, Seagrane was a man of whose past we know nothing and, according to statements he has made from time to time, he must have passed through some rough experiences."

"So he told me," Cheriton said, "more than once. But I don't think this is a case of a vendetta. As I informed Inspector Shallock, Lord Seagrane walked boldly into the library and challenged the intruder. More than that, he grappled with him. That the man was masked I saw for myself. But surely, if he had been an enemy of Seagrane's, then the latter

would have called his name before grappling with him. Then don't forget that safe door had been forced, and documents and papers were strewn all over the floor. I don't believe for a moment that the murderer really intended to commit a crime, beyond safe breaking ; but when he found himself in a powerful grip, he did not hesitate to shoot. I feel pretty sure that he was looking for something in that safe, and what that something was and whether or not he got away with it is the puzzle we have to solve."

"Yes, but Shallock tells me, after a conversation with Mrs. Marchand, that there was nothing of value in the safe," the Chief Constable pointed out.

"Possibly not. Possibly his lordship had moved it somewhere else, and therefore the burglary, and the subsequent murder were what one might call wasted efforts. However, it is no use standing here talking generalities. I have been on to Scotland Yard this morning by telephone and they are sending a good man down here. An Inspector by the name of Merrick. Meanwhile, we might as well look at the papers in the library and see if they point to anything."

But a careful search amongst the papers led to nothing of the least importance. They were mostly such things as leases and tenants' agreements, invoices and estimates—what one would expect in connection with a large estate.

CHAPTER XVI

"JUST one moment," Cheriton said, before the others turned to leave. "We have made a thorough search of all those papers and noted their contents. But there is one important document that seems to be missing."

"And what may that be?" Major Mills demanded.

"Lord Seagrane's will. We know that he made it a few months ago, just after Mrs. Marchand and her daughter came to live at Holt. They are distant relatives of his—in fact, the only two persons related to Seagrane who are alive to-day. Now Seagrane is dead, the title is extinct, and I know that he was anxious to provide for Mrs. Marchand and her daughter—in fact, he did so. He made that will himself and had it witnessed by the butler and the cook. When this was done, he told Mrs. Marchand that if anything happened to him, his will would be found in the safe. And now we know that it is not to be discovered."

"But you are not suggesting that those scoundrels came all that way and took such an enormous risk to gain possession of a man's will, are you?" Mills asked. "What on earth would

be the good of a piece of paper like that to them?"

"None whatever," Cheriton agreed promptly. "I am merely calling attention to the fact that not only has a mysterious murder been committed, but also that a document of the last importance cannot be found. And if no trace of it is eventually made, then the Seagrane estates and all the money settled on them by the late Earl will go to the Crown. And I am quite sure that my poor friend Seagrane never intended anything like that. His idea was to leave the property and a huge income attached to it to the son of his late partner. That is Mr. Andrew Canton, who is, at the moment, in the house. The understanding seems to have been that Mr. Canton should marry Mrs. Marchand's daughter and that would have rounded off the romance that the poor old gentleman had at the back of his mind. I presume that he also left a certain sum of money to Mrs. Marchand herself, but as to that I cannot say, because the testator never mentioned it to a soul and nobody knew what the contents of the will were, and even the witnesses were left in ignorance."

"Yes," the Major said thoughtfully. "I suppose they would be. But isn't it just possible that his lordship destroyed that will with the intention of making another? He was a rather impetuous character, and if anything

upset him—say a trifling dispute with his heir—then I think he was very likely a person to have torn up his testament in a moment of anger."

To this Cheriton made no reply. The Major's shrewd remark had opened up a fresh field for thought altogether. There was something undoubtedly to be said in support of a theory that the will had been torn up and thrown into the fire. Just about the time, perhaps, when that unsavoury money-lending business had cropped up and Seagrane had had that scene with Canton.

"However, I should like to know something further about this will," Mills went on. "Shallock, go and fetch the butler and the cook and ask them to come here for a moment."

Shallock returned a few moments later followed by the butler, Eccles, and the cook, to the establishment. They were both looking a little alarmed, the cook especially.

"There is nothing to be frightened about," Mills said. "I only want to ask you a question or two. Now, I am given to understand that you two witnessed your late master's will."

The speechless cook turned to Eccles.

"Very well," Mills said. "Let him speak for both."

"There isn't much to say, sir," the venerable butler took up the tale. "I can't exactly remember the date without having time to

think, but about five months ago, more or less, his lordship called me and my wife here, into the library, to witness his will. We knew it was his will, because he said so. So we just put our signatures to it, according to instructions and, when that was done, he gave us a pound note each and sent us away. What was inside that document, I don't know any more than the dead, sir. And that is all I can tell you."

"No, it isn't," the portly cook said. "Don't forget as that wasn't the only time we was witnesses to his lordship and see him sign a bit of a document."

"There now," Eccles exclaimed. "If I hadn't gone and forgotten all about it! Let me see now, when was it? Not so very long ago. Yes, it were Friday fortnight. It was only on one sheet of paper, the same sort as the will was wrote on, and we wasn't in the library two minutes."

There was nothing more to be said or done as far as the two servants were concerned, and, with a wave of his hand, the Chief Constable sent them back to their work.

"Yes," he said. "I am quite satisfied that a will existed and I might suggest that the other single sheet of paper was something in the way of a codicil. Of course, that may be mère surmise and, in any case, it doesn't lead us any further. But I refuse to believe that the

burglar who was here the night before last came here for the purpose of stealing a will. What on earth would be the good of it to him? If he did take it away with him, then the first thing he would do would be to destroy it. No criminal, unless he were mad, would be fool enough to keep a thing like that. It would be equivalent to having his own execution warrant on his person."

Mills and his subordinate went their way presently, having first intimated that the inquest would take place to-morrow morning at eleven o'clock in the great hall at Holt, and that everybody in the house must be prepared to give evidence.

But eleven o'clock the following morning came and went, and three or four dreary hours passed in what appeared to Cheriton to be a sheer waste of time. One after the other, the servants came forward and testified, after which the local constable also spoke on oath, and then towards four o'clock in the afternoon the coroner adjourned the proceedings for a month. As the conference broke up, Cheriton found himself suddenly face to face with his old Inspector, Merrick.

"Well, this is a strange meeting, Mr. Cheriton," the other said. "Fancy coming down here—"

"So they put the case in your hands after all, did they?" Cheriton interrupted. "Yes,

I knew they were thinking of doing something of the kind."

"A very wise move, too," Merrick said in his most pompous manner. "Of course, I know our relationship is not what it used to be, because you have turned into a gentleman again and you don't have to come into my office and salute me any longer. We are just man to man, and I ask you, very respectfully, not to interfere in this business. There is an old saying that, once a policeman, always a policeman, and there is a lot of truth in this, too. However, you stick to your books and leave me to handle this case without butting in, if you understand what I mean. Besides, it has nothing to do with you, though I won't say that your handling of the case to start with was anything but good."

This was Merrick at his best, or worst, from the point of view in which it was regarded, so Cheriton merely smiled and permitted himself to remark that it was not for a humble individual like himself to come between the famous Inspector and the execution of his duty. So, although he had not forgotten the wax disc that was at present lying upstairs in his collar drawer in his bedroom and which might prove something in the way of a clue, he said nothing about it to Merrick, neither was he going to do anything of the sort. Let Merrick work on the case as he liked, but that was not going to prevent him

from doing his best to get to the bottom of this strange case.

He would have liked to have had a few more words with Canton, but the latter had disappeared somewhere, so he wandered, presently, into the great hall, now cleared of all signs of the inquest and its sordid surroundings. A footman came in with the tea equipage and proceeded to lay out the table. Just as he had finished Evelyn entered listlessly and announced the fact that her mother was not coming down, as the events of the day had been too much for her, and she was lying down till dinner-time.

"A pretty trying day for all of us," Cheriton agreed. "And only a few hours ago——"

"Yes, I know what you are going to say," Evelyn murmured. "A few hours ago and we were all so happy."

"Something like that," Cheriton said. "But, Evie, were we so very happy? Comparatively, yes, but you know what I mean."

Evelyn turned her frank, open gaze on Cheriton's face. "I understand," she said. "Oh, why should we pretend and play at the conventions in this dark hour? You are alluding to the poor, dear old man's idea of romance. With me for one of the central characters, Andrew Canton for another. I could never have gone through with it, never. And I am not quite sure that latterly my dear benefactor

would have wished me to. I mean, after the way in which Andrew was constantly deceiving him. Those gambling and other debts. The lies and deceit."

Evelyn stopped as if unable to proceed.

"I would have done my best,"—she took up the thread again,—“without complaining. But I could not have married Andrew. I tried to think I could once, but now——”

She could get no further, so Cheriton hastened to speak.

“Try and forget it,” he said soothingly. “We have so many more important things to think of.”

“I hope you don’t think me selfish,” Evelyn smiled faintly through the gathering tears. “Andrew himself for one. What did he say when he was called this afternoon? I wasn’t there, Cliff—I could not bear to listen to all that cold-blooded business. No doubt it was necessary, but it seemed so callous to me. So, when I found that I wasn’t wanted, I left.”

“Canton wasn’t wanted either,” Cheriton explained. “Or at least, like you, he wasn’t reached. But I managed to save him from the risk of making a fool of himself.”

“What quite does that mean?” Evelyn asked.

“Well, over that Sandwich business. If Canton had gone into the box this morning and glibly told the coroner that he was at Sandwich

all day before the Earl died and that he spent the night there, the truth would certainly have come out sooner or later and Canton would have been suspected. His recklessness and his gambling weaknesses would have been made much of, also his disputes with the Earl over money matters. We imagine that these things are secret from the household, but they seldom are. And servants, like their employers, are not free from gossip. And don't forget that it is common property that Canton inherits everything here, including the private fortune which has been settled on the estates. All depending on Canton's good behaviour, of course. Looking at it from the police point of view, the one person who benefits by the death of his late lordship is Canton. He goes into the witness-box and testifies on oath that he was at Sandwich on the night of the murder. What will the authorities think when they discover that the statement is a lie?"

Evelyn paused with the milk-jug in her hand.

"But surely," she began, "you don't suspect—"

"Perhaps not, but Merrick of Scotland Yard, who has the case in hand, surely will. And then—"

Cheriton stopped short as Canton lounged moodily into the hall. He frowned at the two seated there.

"Another conspiracy," he sneered. "What are you putting your heads together about?"

"You," Cheriton responded promptly. "I was just telling Evelyn that the late Earl's will can't be found. It is not in the safe where he told Mrs. Marchand to look for it in case he died. And if it never turns up, then your chance of ever getting a penny of the money isn't worth the proverbial cent."

Canton gasped as he collapsed into a chair.

CHAPTER XVII

IT required no great discernment to see that Cheriton's declaration with regard to the missing will had shaken Canton to the centre of his being. The ingrained selfishness of the man was written all over him. Even at that moment, with the dead body of his benefactor lying in the house, he was thinking of his own interests to the exclusion of everything else.

"I don't quite understand you," he said presently, when he had partially recovered his somewhat scattered wits.

"I thought I had made it plain enough," Cheriton said. "Perhaps I ought not to mention it just now when I have so many more serious things to think of. But it is not a matter to be too lightly regarded. The detectives, under the guidance of Major Mills, have ransacked everything in the library and there is no sign of Lord Seagrane's will to be found. This is all the more remarkable because Mrs. Marchand was told that if anything happened to him it would be in the safe."

"And it wasn't?" Canton asked eagerly.

"Not a trace of it. Perhaps you will understand now how the disappearance of this will affects you."

"But surely there must be a will somewhere," Canton almost wept. "I know the old man—"

"I don't think I should speak of him like that if I were you, Andrew," Evelyn suggested gently. "We were talking about you when you came in and Clifford was telling me all about that Sandwich affair. So, you see, there is no reason why we should not discuss the matter openly."

"What has that got to do with it?" Canton snarled.

"Don't you think you are a bit quick in taking up that line," Cheriton said sternly. "And don't forget that you will have to explain where you were and what you were doing when you told that ridiculous story about a day's golf at Sandwich and your friend, Landon. However, that is not what we were discussing. Sooner or later, we shall know where you went, so I am not going to argue any further on that point. But you must be aware that during the last few weeks you have been giving Lord Seagrange a deal of anxiety."

"In what way?" Canton demanded.

"Well, in the matter of that money-lending business for one thing. Yes, I know all about it."

Canton's jaw dropped and his face flushed. He was wondering how on earth Cheriton had learnt this, though the latter was not in the least disposed to tell him.

"That is a solitary instance," Cheriton went on. "And there are others. Now, my idea is that the poor old gentleman was so annoyed with you that he destroyed his will with the intention of making another. That so often happens, and fate interposed to prevent him doing anything of the sort. I am quite sure that the missing will will never be found."

In this it looked as if Cheriton was right, for the next two or three days passed without any signs of the will and it was still undiscovered when the funeral took place. It was a quiet ceremony, attended by few people, because Seagrane had not encouraged the advances of his neighbours and, besides the tenants and the workmen on the estate, there was nobody in the churchyard when the remains of the murdered man were laid in the family vault. As they were all turning away from the graveside, Cheriton was not a little astonished to see, amongst the casual visitors, Bradman and Cleaver from the Dormy House, both of whom had donned black clothes for the occasion.

With an idea uppermost in his mind, Cheriton followed them in the direction of the Dormy House. He spoke to them and then Bradman turned and addressed him.

"This is a very sorry business," he said. "Me and my friend thought we would come and pay our last respects to the old Earl, seeing that we had met him more than once or twice on the

links, which, I understand, was his private property. I hope you won't be long in laying the murderer by the heels."

Cheriton responded appropriately enough, though he smiled to himself to see that both Bradman and Cleaver were wearing black gloves for the occasion. So they walked side by side as far as the Dormy House, where the two men disappeared and Cheriton found himself alone in the bar, behind which stood James the steward, busy with his usual vocation.

"Sorry I could not get up to the funeral, sir," he said. "But one thing and another detained me until it was too late."

"You don't look very busy," Cheriton said. "Do you mean that you have got many people staying in the house?"

"No, sir," James responded. "Only those two gentlemen who have just come in."

"Are they remaining any time?"

"I believe they are, sir. I think I heard one tell the other this morning that they might just as well go on here for the present, rather than be spending their time in London. But Mr. Bradman he is going up for the week-end."

Cheriton allowed this remark to pass in silence, because he was feeling his way up to an inquiry which might, or might not, have some bearing on the Seagrane Holt tragedy. It was James himself who afforded the opening.

"No sort of clue, sir, I suppose?" he asked.

" So far, nothing. But in cases like this it is astonishing how many blind alleys the detectives run up before they finally emerge on the right road. For instance, they might suspect even you or me or those two gentlemen who have just gone upstairs. Now, I wonder if they could account for their movements on the night of the murder. I am only putting this as a test case, though you never can tell where crime is concerned."

" I don't think I should worry about them, sir, if I were you," James said. " Because, you see, in a manner of speaking, I should be a witness for the defence. Now, according to what come out at the inquest, his lordship was murdered just after one o'clock. You told the coroner that, didn't you, sir ? "

" Oh, there is no question about the time," Cheriton said.

" Very well then, sir. You see, Mr. Bradman he suffers a lot from what he calls gastric indigestion. Catches him in the stomach something dreadful. Especially at night, and there is nothing for it but a little neat brandy."

" Indeed," Cheriton smiled. " But what on earth has that got to do with the successful alibi ? Mind you, I am only using the word alibi in the ordinary sense and not suggesting for a moment that it is anything but an idle theory. However, go on."

" Well, sir, it's like this. I happened to be

up very late on the night that the poor old Earl was killed. It must have been twelve o'clock or after that I was free to go to bed, and just as I was climbing the stairs I heard somebody groan. So I just stood still for a few minutes, wondering where the noise came from. Then I located it in a double-bedded room where those two gents sleep. I didn't like to butt in, in a manner of speaking, sir, so I just waited. Then, presently, out on the landing comes Mr. Cleaver in his pyjamas and, catching sight of me, says as how his friend is mortal bad and would I go down-stairs into the bar and get him a wineglassful of neat brandy. So I nipped down again and got the brandy, whilst all the time the groans were going on. Mr. Cleaver he took the glass from me and I naturally waited out on the landing to see if I should be needed again. Then the groans stopped and I heard Mr. Bradman gasp that that was better and, after a few minutes' conversation which I overheard, Mr. Cleaver he comes out again and says it's all right now and there was no reason for me to sit up any longer."

"Well, that effectually explodes any ridiculous suggestion that these gentlemen had anything to do with the murder," Cheriton smiled. "All the same, James, it would be just as well if you didn't mention this conversation to anybody. In the circumstances, even a

joke like that might lead to a lot of gossip."

A word or two more and Cheriton walked out of the Dormy House and turned his footsteps in the direction of the cottage. There he would be alone as long as he chose without any chance of interruption and with ample time to think over a certain theory which was forming in his mind with regard to the murderer.

In any case, he was not going to take Merrick into his confidence. Let that individual go his own way and he, Cheriton, would go his. And they would see later on which of them had been right in his deductions.

For a long time, Cheriton sat in the solitude of his room and allowed his mind to play on certain recent events. He took from a drawer in his writing-table the two packs of playing cards he had obtained from James a few days before. But the more he studied these and worked on them with the limited means at his disposal, the more puzzled he became. Those extraordinary marks and those little threads of wax baffled him completely.

Then an idea occurred to him. He packed up the cards carefully and restored them to their place. Then, it being not far from dinner-time, he went back to Seagrane Holt and announced the fact that he was going to Town on the morrow, and that he might not be back for two or three days.

"Just personal business," he said casually.

CHAPTER XVIII

BUT it was anything rather than personal business that had induced Cheriton to turn his back on Seagrane Holt in the midst of that tragic crisis. At twelve o'clock the following day, he found himself seeking admission to a flat in Gower Street and sending in his card, on which was pencilled a word or two, after which the man who answered the door informed him that Mr. Trevor Penton was at home and would be glad to see him.

Trevor Penton was a scientist whose knowledge of analysis had been more than once of considerable assistance to Scotland Yard. He belonged to the new school of chemists in criminology who can take a pinch of fluff found in a workman's coat pocket and resolve the mass into its component parts. He had been at school with Cheriton and they had kept up their friendship, more or less, ever since.

Yet Penton declined to call himself an analytical chemist, his ambition lying more in the theatrical line. He was the author of a dozen unacted plays and a number of sketches of which only one so far had seen the light of publicity. All his spare time was passed with members of

the profession and he was a popular member of one or two theatrical clubs.

He was not in the sitting-room at the moment that Cheriton entered, so that the latter had time to look about him and notice that three or four photographs of musical comedy celebrities had been added to Penton's large collection.

In the centre of these, on the mantelpiece, was a photograph of a young woman, scantily, not to say daringly, dressed, and underneath the signature "Yours lovingly, Nance Carey."

Here was a discovery. Cheriton could not see the full significance of it for the moment, but he would later on. For the moment, he had forgotten all about Miss Carey and the loss of her diamonds, to say nothing of the way in which he had been dismissed from the Police Force by Inspector Merrick not so very long ago. Now, the whole thing flashed into his mind.

But he said nothing of this for the moment when Penton entered and greeted him with boisterous enthusiasm.

"Up on the spree, eh?" the latter said. "Our latest celebrity scattering his money about, what?"

"Nothing of the sort," Cheriton responded. "I am up here on business, and pretty serious business at that. I suppose you have read all about the Seagrane tragedy?"

Penton became grave at once.

"I had forgotten that you were actually stay-

ing in the house," he said. "Now, just where do I come in?"

Cheriton laid the two packs of cards on the table and proceeded to explain precisely how they had come into his possession. Penton examined them through a microscope and then, leaving the room for a few moments, proceeded to his workshop in an attic at the top of the flat where, with the aid of his man and his complete outfit, he tested for finger-prints. Half an hour later, he was back in the flat again.

"This is rather a funny business, old chap," he said. "There are distinct impressions of four sets of finger-marks on these cards, but they are superimposed one over the top of the other so closely that it is almost impossible to separate them. I should say that these cards were used for some game which did not last long. Am I right?"

"Absolutely," Cheriton said. "They were used in a game of bridge played in the Dormy House at Sandchester Golf Links two days before Lord Seagrane was murdered. They were only used for one rubber and it only occupied three hands altogether. Then the table was broken up and I got hold of those cards. Mind you, I am not suggesting that they have anything to do with the crime; but, on the other hand, it is possible that there is a clue behind them. Then you mean to tell me that you can't possibly manage to obtain a set of individual prints."

"No, I don't think I can," Penton said.

frankly. "But there is one fairly marked print which shows a peculiar characteristic. It is evidently a right thumb and I should say marked the cards when the holder was dealing. A right-handed man who held the pack loosely in his left hand and dealt with the right, pressing the ball of his thumb and part of the first joint as he flicked each card over the table. But what puzzles me is, though I can see the crease in the thumb, just at the first joint and a few faint whorls above, the upper part of the thumb makes no mark at all. And that is very strange. Of course, it is possible that the individual card-player I have alluded to has followed some occupation which has rubbed the whorls off his thumb altogether, or he may have had a scald or burn or something of that sort. But I should hardly think that, because the whorls stop so suddenly, just as if they had been cut off with a knife. However, if you like, I will give the matter a more severe test and let you know all about it in a day or two."

Cheriton made no reply for a moment or two. He stood there in puzzled thought. He had watched the play of that particular game with more than usual carefulness, for he had been intent upon detecting anything in the way of cheating on the part of Bradman and his companion. It seemed to him, therefore, that with his trained police mind he would have been certain to notice if there had been anything

the matter with the thumbs of either of the players. However, for the moment, he would have to put that consideration on one side. He had gone now as far as he could, and he would be compelled to wait for a further report from Penton. Moreover, he was not positively sure that Canton had been cheated at all, though he could not altogether dismiss from his mind the impression that he had seen somewhere in print, or in actual play, exactly the same hands dealt in a rubber as had been on that particular afternoon in the Dormy House.

"Well, thanks very much, old chap," he said to Penton. "I will run in again in a day or two——"

"Here, not so fast," Penton interrupted. "We are going to lunch together. I don't come in contact every day with a literary swell of the first water, like you, so I am going to show you off at one of our theatrical clubs."

"Very well, I don't mind," Cheriton said. "By the way, how is the dramatic composition getting on?"

"Absolutely rotten," Penton admitted. "But I peg away at it, boy, I peg away. I shall get through some day. You see, I have got hosts of friends in the profession."

"So I noticed," Cheriton said dryly as he glanced at the mantelpiece. "By the way, here is a new one. Where did you manage to steal that from?"

"What, Nance Carey? Oh, she gave it to me

all right. She is one of those vaudeville stars, or so-called stars, from America. Came over here for a holiday, she says. But quite willing to sign a contract on this side for £100 a week if she can get it. Not a bad sort, though no longer in the chicken stage. She's the one who had her jewels stolen from the Grand Park Hotel the other day. You might have seen the case in the papers."

"I thought I recognized the lady," Cheriton said. "As a matter of fact I had the case in hand at first. But I made a botch of the first stage and my Inspector told me off, whereupon I sent in my resignation and, between ourselves, glad of the chance. If you want to know my private opinion, I should say that there was no robbery at all and that the whole thing was a fake for the sake of advertisement; but this is not for publication."

"I think you are wrong," Penton said. "Anyway, the lady went to Armstrong of the Comus and pleaded temporary poverty and he gave her a part in a new revue sketch which she is playing in at the present moment. Because I am doing something for Armstrong and have the run of his theatre, I came in contact with the lady, hence her picture in my collection."

"I should like to see her again," Cheriton observed. "We met at the Grand Park and all that."

"Well, perhaps we shall at lunch-time today," Penton said. "It is a mixed club I am taking you to and I know that Nance Carey is

an honorary member. Only she has been rather seedy the last day or two. Most remarkable affair. She was playing that sketch I told you about in a charity *matinée* when she suddenly threw up her hands and rushed from the stage and collapsed in her dressing-room. All right a little later, but much shaken. Nerves."

" Possibly," Cheriton said dryly. " But more like a new form of advertisement. How did she account for it ? "

" I don't know, because I wasn't there. But one of those critic chaps who does gossip in a cheap paper claims to know all about it and wrote a lot in his rag next day. Let me see, which day last week was it ? Anyway, if you care to look whilst I change my coat and get a brush up you will find most of the current and old newspapers on that oak table yonder."

Cheriton hastily ran through the columns of Penton's daily penny sheet until he found what he wanted. It was all there with head-lines, and the writer had let himself go.

" The scene in the Comus last Thursday when a talented actress from the other side of the herring pond, in the form of Miss Nance Carey, suddenly broke down and hurried from the stage was due to a sudden attack of nerves, a disease from which even the most seasoned histrions occasionally suffer. She tells me that such a thing has never occurred to her before. For the benefit of those who were not present

I can tell them that the sketch was a comedy in which Miss Carey was a young wife who mixes up the name of a horse with that of a woman, which is no novelty in sketches and has little to do with the story. As the young wife lolls on a couch the action of the story calls for the butler to enter with the four o'clock edition of the evening paper, and in this instance it was actually that very edition of the *Evening Messenger*. Miss Carey unfolded it and, after one glance at the inside, threw up her hands and fled from the stage. She——”

But Cheriton read no further. What he wanted to do now was to get hold of that evening edition of the *Messenger*. There were evening papers on the oak table and presently, amongst them, he laid hands on that which he was seeking. It was the racing edition of the *Messenger*, published at four o'clock on that especial Thursday, which happened to be the day following the murder of Seagrane, or rather, some thirteen hours after the discovery of the crime. There was uppermost in Cheriton's mind at that moment the memory of the two men whose photographs he had seen in the paper he found in Nance Carey's steel-lined case.

And there in the sheet he held in his hand he found in the stop-press edition one line that ran thus :

“ Lord Seagrane was found murdered this morning.”

CHAPTER XIX

CHERITON had fully expected to find something in that particular early racing edition of the *Messenger* which might connect Miss Carey with her exhibition on the stage the afternoon following the death of Lord Seagrane. But nothing so intensely dramatic as the one line in the stop-press news.

There could be no doubt that those impressive words had sent Nance Carey off the stage in a condition bordering on collapse. But why? What had happened to connect the actress with the strange crime at Seagrane Holt? She could not have been within miles of the place when Seagrane was struck down, and yet the murder had most profoundly affected her. Nor could Cheriton find on the inside page of the *Messenger* anything else which was likely to have brought about that exhibition of emotion.

Then there flashed into his mind the recollection of the old American newspaper which he had discovered in Nance Carey's steel-lined case when he had started his investigations of the disappearance of her jewels. He remembered the portraits of those two men whose names were not given, but who were

apparently connected with some sensational crime on the other side of the Atlantic—the two men whom he now knew to be Bradman and Cleaver. And both of these, at the present moment, were in the neighbourhood of Seagrane Holt and had been when the murder was committed. Of course, this might be mere coincidence and, on the other hand, it might lead to a startling discovery. And yet, on the face of it, Bradman and Cleaver had a perfect alibi. There was old James, who was, no doubt, prepared to go into the witness-box and swear that at the hour when the crime had been committed those two were in their bedroom in the Dormy House of the Sandchester Golf Links. There was no doubt that this evidence on the part of so respectable a man as James would go far to clearing the two strangers of any complicity in the murder.

Still, with his three years' experience of detective work, Cheriton had seen more than one cast-iron alibi break down on investigation and he was not going to allow this one to pass as a matter of course. All the same, it behoved him to step warily and do nothing that was likely to put those two men on their guard. They would know, of course, as everybody within miles of Seagrane Holt already knew, that Scotland Yard had the case in hand in the person of Inspector Merrick, so that he, Cheriton, would start at a great advantage in his investigations, for those

two would never suspect that he was pursuing a line of policy of his own with the object of handing the criminals over to justice.

Cheriton sat there, pondering the matter in his mind and wondering whether or not to take Trevor Penton into his confidence. After all, why not? Penton derived a certain portion of his income from Scotland Yard and he was the last man in the world to betray a secret. Therefore, when Penton came into the room, Cheriton opened the *Messenger* and placed a forefinger impressively on the startling line in the stop-press edition.

"I want to call your attention to this," he said. "You see what it is. Just as this particular edition of the paper was going to press after the morning following Seagrane's death, news of the murder reached the office. They had only time to shove a few words into the 'fudge,' but, no doubt, the later editions contained full particulars. Now, mark you, at a *matinée* in the Comus Theatre on that afternoon, a copy of the four o'clock edition was handed to Nance Carey, who was on the stage playing a part in a sketch. She had to open the paper in the discharge of her business and make some flippant allusion to a paragraph therein. Or rather, a supposed paragraph therein. Any old paper would have done for her purpose, but I suppose the actor who was playing the part of the butler was reading the news himself

while he waited for his cue, and thought the paper he carried in his hand would do as well as anything else, which, of course, it did. Now if you can find anything inside those two inside sheets to send an actress into hysterics, I will ask you to be good enough to point it out to me. I can discover nothing of the sort. My dear fellow, it was that one pregnant line in the stop-press edition that carried the Carey woman off her feet."

"But why?" Penton asked. "She didn't know Seagrane."

"How are we to be sure of that? My impression is that she did. Mind you, Seagrane had lived a very hectic sort of life in America and must have come in close contact with many queer characters of whom we know nothing. As a matter of fact, he was rather reticent about his past. Still, we need not go into that. Now, look here, old chap. Before my sudden exit from Scotland Yard, I was told off to inquire into the loss of Nance Carey's jewels. But I told you that just now."

"Of course you did," Penton replied.

"Well, there you are. And in the course of my inquiries I had occasion to examine a steel-lined suit-case from which the property was lifted. And in that case I discovered an old American newspaper containing what I presume to be the photographs of two American criminals. They were in some way connected with what

the press called the 'Test Case.' No names were given under the photographs, but I recognized them as two men who are staying at the present moment within a few miles of Seagrane Holt. They are passing themselves off as rich Australians, but that does not deceive me, because I was the best part of a year in America and I am quite sure that they are Yankee crooks."

"Very interesting," Penton murmured. "Then you think they are down there with evil intent."

"I am quite sure of it. Mind you, they never came near Seagrane Holt and I don't know whether one of them ever spoke to Lord Seagrane. But there they are, apparently wasting their time playing golf, which game is only a blind. And they have got what appears to be an unshakable alibi, which fact I established before I came up here to-day. I can't tell you any more than that at present, and I am going to ask you to forget my story until I ask you to remember it again. Now, about Miss Carey. Is she a particular friend of yours?"

"No, not specially," Penton said carelessly. "I find her rather nice and charming, but there is no getting away from the fact that she is well over forty. She doesn't look it, but I know that she has been in American vaudeville for nearly twenty-five years. Started as a kid, on what they call the Western Circuit. Doing

small towns and all that sort of thing for years. She has some strange stories to tell about her adventures, and I should say that one way or another, she has had a pretty hard life. But what does all this lead to?"

"Well, I can hardly tell you yet," Cheriton said. "I only wanted to make sure that your friendship with this woman would not make you antagonistic, because I want you to help. I want you to arrange, if you can, so that I can meet Miss Carey in a social way. Say lunch, or dinner, or something of that sort. 'Fancy meeting you' sort of thing."

"Oh, I think I can manage that here and now," Penton said. "She generally lunches at the very club that I am taking you to and we are almost certain to meet her there."

"Good," Cheriton cried. "Now, one more question before we set out in search of food. About those wax impressions on the cards. Are they pure wax?"

"No, they are not," Penton explained. "The tiny fragments I found are mixed with some sort of material, the name of which I know, though it would convey nothing to you. I mean the scientific name. It is something with a shade of plaster of Paris in it which is used by plastic surgeons."

"I suppose you mean those sort of chaps who build up professional beauties and take out their wrinkles."

"Something of that sort. However, I will make a more careful examination this afternoon and let you know exactly what the component parts of the mixture are."

With that, Cheriton was content for the moment. It would be quite time to mention the wax disc he had discovered on the library floor at Holt when he was ready to take the next step in his own negotiations. He was hoping that the disc corresponded with Penton's analysis.

They left Penton's flat a little later and went off on foot in the direction of the Bohemian club in Soho, where the scientist elected to lunch. It was a small place with a rather cosmopolitan clientele, and by the time the two friends arrived there, most of the tables were occupied. It was only near the door that accommodation could be afforded.

They were about to sit down and take their places when Cheriton, almost by instinct—an instinct gained in the Police Force—glanced round the room and, as he did so, he pulled up suddenly and grasped Penton by the arm.

"Do you mind if we don't lunch here at all?" he whispered hurriedly. "We haven't taken our seats yet and if we go out again are not likely to attract any attention."

"Oh, as you like," Penton said. "It's all the same to me. But why this sudden change of mind?"

"Glance at that top table in the corner under the big palm," Cheriton said. "I think you will see that the lady we are seeking is seated there with a companion. And that companion happens to be Andrew Canton, whose name you must have seen in connection with the late Lord Seagrane's. It is vital that those two shouldn't know I have seen them together."

CHAPTER XX

AFTER these few words, Penton led the way outside, and a few moments later the two were seated at a table in a restaurant on the other side of the road. Penton asked but few questions, but the replies he received were quite sufficient for his purpose. Presently they parted and Cheriton turned his steps in the direction of Lincoln's Inn Fields, where, at Mrs. Marchand's request, he was going to see one of the partners in the famous legal firm of Prendergast, who had been, for generations, the family solicitors to the Seagrane.

They were a firm of such distinction that, in signing their letters they simply used the word "Prendergasts," just as if they had been connected with the nobility, and, indeed, they were not far apart from such distinction. In the gloomy offices Cheriton waited for some time until, at length, he was admitted to the presence of a tall man of aristocratic appearance who gave the name of Arthur Prendergast, and asked his business. When Cheriton had stated this, Mr. Prendergast frowned.

"A singular affair altogether," he said. "And all the more complicated because, as you are

aware, Mr. Cheriton, there is no sign whatever of our late client's will."

"He might have destroyed it," Cheriton suggested.

"Now, I should think that exceedingly probable," the lawyer said. "When the late Lord Seagrane came into the title, he visited us and gave certain instructions. In the first place, we were to call in all the mortgages and discharge them. He wished to clear the estate and, as the mortgagees in ordinary circumstances were extremely unlikely to see any of their money again, we had no great difficulty in doing this forthwith. This absorbed the best part of a quarter of a million. Then we had instructions to put all the property on the estate in perfect condition, and that meant at least another fifty thousand pounds. We were told to spare no expense, but to get the work done at once, which we accordingly did. What with that and the installing of electric light and the water plant and all the rest of it, there was nothing left out of half a million. And then we were to settle the estates on the next of kin. But, you know, there is no next of kin in what we lawyers call tail male. That is, so far as we know, Lord Seagrane was the last surviving member of his race. At least, so he said."

"And I believe he was right," Cheriton replied. "But then, he had an adopted son."

"Precisely. Mr. Andrew Canton. Failing anybody else, the property would have been Mr. Canton's, and a magnificent income besides. We didn't make the will, because the old gentleman had a curious idea that he could do it better himself. Anyway, he showed it to us and we advised him that it was watertight. And there was an end as far as we were concerned."

"But the last month or two Lord Seagrane was not entirely satisfied with the way Canton was going on."

"Ah, if you know that, then I can speak more freely," Prendergast said. "He was extremely dissatisfied and some correspondence on the subject passed between us. From what I could gather, it seemed extremely likely that his lordship intended to make a fresh arrangement just before he was murdered. If we can't find that will, which I shrewdly suspect has been destroyed, then it will be extremely awkward for Mr. Andrew Canton, and he will get nothing. He is no relation of his late lordship's."

"As a matter of fact, he isn't," Cheriton said. "But I am thinking more about—more about Mrs. Marchand and her daughter. It will be extremely hard—"

"I don't think you need worry much about them," Prendergast interrupted. "You see, we hold securities of his lordship's which represent

something in the neighbourhood of a hundred thousand pounds. These he intended to leave to Mrs. Marchand and her daughter and they will probably get them, because they are collateral relations of his, and if no other claimants appear —a contingency very remote—Mrs. Marchand will naturally take it all."

Cheriton did not remain much longer after this explanation on the lawyer's part, because it had cleared up the very point that was troubling him. Whatever happened now, Mrs. Marchand would be amply provided for and need have no fear as to the future. There was just one question that he asked before he took his leave. And that was what became of the property in case the will was lost or had been destroyed.

"In that case," Prendergast said, "the whole property goes to the Crown. It is rather unfortunate that it should be so, but perhaps it is best that the property should go to the State rather than to a young man who might gamble it all away."

It was a thousand pities, Cheriton told himself as he made his way homewards. Still, those he cared most for were being looked after, and it was a matter of absolute indifference to him whether Canton had to get his own living or not. For Canton had become mixed up with some very doubtful people and Cheriton began to wonder whether or not that young man knew

more of the tragedy at Holt than appeared on the surface.

There was his journey to London, for instance, which he had so carefully concealed. So far as Canton could see, there was no reason for doing anything of the kind. If he had told Seagrane on the morning before the murder that he had wanted to go to London for a few hours, the old gentleman would most certainly have given his consent. Of course, there was the fact that Canton needed the money desperately to meet his card obligations to those two sharpers, and there was the missing Holbein to account for the deception and the hurried visit to London under cover of a day's golf at Sandwich. And there were other suspicious points which had to be cleared up.

For instance, how had Canton become on such friendly terms with Nance Carey as to be in a position to take her out to lunch? And then, again— Oh, well, it was perhaps better to put these things out of his mind, Cheriton decided, until he had a few hours' quiet to himself, when he could get his theories into proper focus. And this he would be in a position to do now, because on the morrow he was going to take up his headquarters permanently at the cottage. In the meantime, Mrs. Marchand and Evelyn would remain at the Holt, probably for many months, because male heirs would be advertised for and, failing them, the State would be

involved in a dragging routine of red tape, and the estate would have to be maintained meanwhile in its present condition.

So Cheriton, after declining to remain to dinner at the Holt that evening, shut himself up in the cottage and lighted his pipe with the intention of devoting the next few hours to ironing out his theories and reducing them to something like a logical series of events.

First of all, those two swindlers at the Dormy House. For what purpose had they come down to Sandchester? And why had they lured Andrew Canton into their clutches? Possibly because they were short of money to carry on their campaign, and they had recognized an easy victim in Canton directly they had met.

But why had they gone to all that trouble to swindle him? It was a swindle, Cheriton felt convinced, though, at the same time, he could not see his way to prove it. That wax and other things on the back of the cards—what did they mean? And then again, Cheriton felt almost certain that he had seen that particular hand of cards played before, or, failing that, he had heard of it somewhere. He had a perfect card memory himself and he could almost visualize, after a lapse of this time, exactly how those four hands lay on the table. He got up from the table where he was seated and went across to his bookshelf and took down Manning Foster's latest volume—or one

of his latest volumes—entitled *Auction Bridge for All*. He would search amongst what that leading British authority on bridge had to say about freak hands in his chapter on "Actuallities."

Almost before he had begun to flutter over the leaves of the work in question he paused and closed it again. To make quite sure he would try and arrange those hands from memory, and, this done, compare his interpretation with the *obiter dicta* of a master of the game. So he laid the book aside for the time being and took from a drawer a pack of cards and began carefully to sort them out into hands as they might have been on that fateful afternoon in the Dormy House. This would be a far better plan than hunting out a specimen hand in *Auction Bridge for All* and then merely thinking that it was the same.

Once the cards were sorted into hands—hands that seemed to Cheriton to correspond with the same as dealt in the Dormy House rubber—it was time to look up the authority.

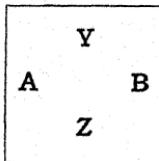
Yes, here it was just as he had worked it out from memory.

ACTUALITY 6. LURE OF A HUNDRED ACES.

Here is a case in which the Declarer clung tenaciously (how I sympathize with him !) to his hundred Aces to his downfall.

S. : J., 10, 8, 7, 2.
 H. : K., 8, 5, 4.
 D. : 10, 5.
 C. : 10, 4.

S. : 9, 4, 3.
 H. : Q., J., 3.
 D. : 9, 7, 4, 2.
 C. : K., 8, 2.



S. : K., Q., 5.
 H. : 10, 7, 6.
 D. : K., Q., J., 8, 6, 3.
 C. : 7.

S. : A., 6.
 H. : A., 9, 2.
 D. : A.
 C. : A., Q., J., 9, 6, 5, 3.

Score.: game all. Y Z 18 in rubber game. Z dealt and bid one no trump. A and Y, no bid. B, two diamonds. Z, two no trumps. Finished.

Winning the first trick with the ace of diamonds, Z put Dummy in with the king of hearts and led ten of clubs, losing his finesse. Whereupon A B made one club and five diamonds, defeating contract.

This is what Cheriton read in Foster's classic, and when, book in hand, he came to compare it with his own laying out of the cards, he discovered that he was only wrong with regard to some small cards in Spades. So here was an absolutely convincing proof of the fact that the impostors had actually borrowed the basic idea of their scheme from Manning Foster's volume,

without even taking care to alter it in the smallest detail. The root idea was to lure Canton on to bid high with a tempting hand headed by four Aces and the long array of Clubs. The first bid of no trumps was sound, but the second was risky and the third idiotic, always bearing in mind the fact that the foe had called two Diamonds. But Canton had plunged rashly, just as he was confidently expected to do, and had met with disaster. But how had it been worked?

For a long time Cheriton sat there thinking. He was trying to visualize the scene with its accompanying storm and the failure of the electric light. And then a light as blinding flashed in front of his eyes. He jumped to his feet.

"Ass that I am!" he murmured. "Of course. I must have been an idiot not to have seen it before."

CHAPTER XXI

IT was working out more or less plainly, for if Cheriton could not see quite all the way as he sat there in his cottage with the cards on the table before him, at least he began to see something like daylight at the end of a dark tunnel.

He knew now, at any rate, that a cunning trick had been played on Andrew Canton by those rascals masquerading as golfers, at the Dormy House. He knew that they had used one of Mr. Manning Foster's examples of actual hand played as recorded in his standard work on the game so as to lure Canton on to gamble and put money in their pockets, not, perhaps, because they actually needed the money but probably more with a view to getting him in their power. It was not for Cheriton to know that the confederates were very nearly at the end of their resources, as he would have done had he been in a position to overhear the conversation between the pair that evening at the Grand Park Hotel when he had been dining with Evelyn, on the night when he had so unexpectedly come into what was a potential fortune.

But for some reason or another, Bradman and

Cleaver were more than anxious to get a strangle-hold on Canton and they had deliberately banked upon that rash and headstrong nature of his. But, for the moment, it did not look as if they had been altogether successful in their efforts. He had not yet had an opportunity of directly challenging Canton with the fact that he had sold the Holbein or pawned it, though he felt quite sure that something of the sort had happened, in which case Canton had probably paid off the debt which he had incurred on the afternoon of the thunderstorm. And, knowing Canton as he did, Cheriton felt quite sure that before long that rash and headstrong young man would find himself in the same mess again. And this time there would be no possibility of liquidating the debt.

But how had that particular trick been worked? Cheriton had in front of him on the table the actual trap itself, proved by the example boldly lifted from Mr. Manning Foster's book, and from that point of view there was no doubt whatever.

But how had the trick itself been worked?

Cheriton could see clearly enough that the confederates had laid their plans some way ahead and were waiting for the first opportunity to put the scheme into practice. And the thunder-storm had given them their opportunity; an opportunity, moreover, worked out in the presence of other people so that it had looked as

if the whole thing had come about naturally. But it hadn't, as Cheriton could see, now.

He remembered how Bradman had gone downstairs to get the cigarettes he pretended he had forgotten, and how Cleaver had suddenly thought of an urgent telephone message he must send, both of which incidents happened so soon after it became dark that it was necessary to turn on the electrics in the smoking-room. That being beyond dispute, it was not a difficult matter for Bradman to go into his bedroom, or wherever it was, and bring back in his pocket a pack of cards so arranged that Canton was dealt the hand which had brought about disaster.

And the other pack could be so easily changed by Bradman when the lights went out. He would change these for those already cut and slip the cards in actual play into his pocket. There would be no difficulty, either, in getting a pack of cards of the same make as those used in the club, for they were of the ordinary type, and it was a thousand to one that nobody would notice the difference in the backs. Then, when everything was ready, Cleaver would slip into the telephone box where nobody was watching him and, by the medium of removing a lamp inside from its socket and pressing a piece of metal to the positive and negative poles, plunge the whole room in darkness.

The more Cheriton thought over this, the

more certain he was that he had hit upon the solution. The exchanged cards would lie innocently on the table until the lights came on again and nobody would think of cutting or shuffling them once more. So far, Cheriton was absolutely satisfied.

But this left a great deal to be explained. For instance, there was the question of the wax on the backs of the cards, which wanted a deal of accounting for in view of the fact that the scheme worked by the confederates did not call for any new and ingenious system of marking. And, having got so far, Cheriton decided to leave the problem for the present.

Shortly after breakfast the following morning, he went as far as Seagrane Holt to discuss with Mrs. Marchand the conversation he had had with Prendergast the day previous. Before he reached the house he came in contact with Andrew Canton, who was moodily walking across the links.

"Well," the latter said. "Anything moving this morning?"

"Nothing to speak of," Cheriton said. "I was just going across to see Mrs. Marchand with a view to telling her what I heard yesterday in London when I called upon Prendergasts, the family lawyers, at her request."

Canton pricked up his ears at this.

"Oh, did you?" he cried. "Well, what about it?"

"I am afraid there is not very much to say," Cheriton said. "It seems that there is no sign whatever of any trace of the late Earl's will. He made it himself and his lawyers merely glanced at it because he asked them if they could see any sort of loophole in it. Mr. Arthur Prendergast told me that it was watertight, whereupon Seagrane took it away, and that appears to be the last that anybody has seen of it. Seagrane Holt has been searched from top to bottom and searched in vain."

"Rather a pity, isn't it?" Canton said carelessly.

"For you, yes," Cheriton agreed. "My dear fellow, you don't seem to understand. Don't forget that you were no relation whatever to the late Lord Seagrane, and if he died without a will, as seems more than probable, then you don't inherit a penny."

The cigarette dropped from Canton's lips and he stood there, gaping at Cheriton with undisguised dismay.

"You don't mean to say that," he cried.

"Indeed I do. It is as plain as a pikestaff. There is no doubt that Lord Seagrane made a will in your favour, leaving you all his estates, absolutely unencumbered, which means that you would have had an income of at least £40,000 a year. But if he destroyed that will——"

"But why on earth should he destroy it?"

" Well, my dear man, ask yourself a question. Haven't you been doing your best for weeks past to induce the poor old gentleman to change his mind? Those gambling debts of yours, your frequent visits to London and last, but not least, that money-lending business. Now, my opinion is that Seagrane tore up his will or burnt it, with the intention of making another one on quite different lines. He probably intended to leave you considerably less, and with what he meant you to have so closely tied up that you couldn't possibly get it all. Naturally, he would not say anything about that to you or to anybody else. He might have done this even by way of a codicil, because you remember that the butler and his wife witnessed another document not so very long ago, the contents of which they knew nothing."

" But that seems to have vanished, too."

" Yes, there is that," Cheriton agreed.

" Look here, Cheriton," Canton said anxiously. " What is all this leading up to? Are you going to tell me that if that will can't be found I get nothing? "

" Well, that is about what it comes to," Cheriton said. " As I pointed out to you before, you are no relation to the dead man—in fact, he seems to have no male relatives at all. This being so, then the estate and its income goes to the Crown. I understand there is a considerable sum of money in securities which is

held by Prendergast and these will probably go to Mrs. Marchand and thence to her daughter, because those two are the only collateral relatives so far as we know. It is very gratifying to know that they will be provided for, at any rate."

But this thought seemed to bring no consolation to Canton, who stared blankly at Cheriton for a moment or two and then turned on his heel without another word.

It was later on in the afternoon and Cheriton was returning to his cottage, lunch being over, and he having told Mrs. Marchand the result of his visit to London, when just beyond the strip of wood behind his cottage he came in contact with Inspector Merrick, who seemed to be looking for something.

"Ah, smelling out a clue?" Cheriton asked jokingly.

"Something of the sort," Merrick admitted.

"I wonder if you would like me to help you," Cheriton suggested.

"Not in the least," Merrick said flatly. "Now, look here, my boy, don't you get butting into this business. You know what a hash you made of that missing jewel case."

"Guilty, my lord," Cheriton laughed. "But wouldn't you be astonished to find that that missing jewel case had some connection with the mystery of Seagrane?"

"Come off it," Merrick said impatiently.

" You are talking like a novelist now, not a detective. And, as I told you before, I have got no use for gentlemen at Scotland Yard. If you know anything, you can tell me; and if you don't like to tell me, you can keep it to yourself. You stick to your novel-writing, my boy, and leave the police-work to those who understand it."

" Oh, all right," Cheriton said. " I was going to give you a pointer or two, but no matter. It's a week now, since the poor old Earl was murdered and I don't mind betting you sixpence that you are no nearer the solution of the crime than you were then."

" Time, my boy, time," Merrick said airily. " At any rate, I have got to thank you for helping me to the extent that you grappled with the actual murderer and forced him to drop his automatic. I have ascertained that it was of American manufacture, with the maker's private mark on it. Shall I tell you what I did? Well, I had the automatic photographed and also every mark on it. We almost dissected it, so as to get picture impressions of every part. Then we transmitted the whole thing across the Atlantic by the telephone photo process. The thing went through beautifully and enabled the American police to get in contact with the manufacturer at once."

" That was very smart," Cheriton admitted.

" I flatter myself it was," Merrick said com-

placently. "But that is not the whole story. I heard this morning that the actual seller had been seen and he is perfectly certain that he disposed of that weapon about six months ago to a Chicago gunman, who is familiarly known amongst his pals as 'Thumbscrew Jake.' But, unfortunately, Thumbscrew Jake disappeared from Chicago early in the year and he has not been seen since. Which is rather a remarkable thing, seeing that the police had nothing in particular on him, and he wasn't wanted for the moment. At least he wasn't wanted in Chicago, though, no doubt, the police elsewhere would have been glad to meet him. So, you see, we now know the actual name of the owner of the automatic that was found in the library at Seagrane Holt, and it is only a question of time before we lay hands upon him."

"Congratulations," Cheriton murmured. "You have done very well so far. But do you think that the man who committed that crime is a long way off by this time?"

"You bet he is," Merrick said emphatically. "You don't suppose he would hang on round here, do you?"

"Well, I don't see why he shouldn't," Cheriton said. "You haven't a shred of evidence against anybody, except that revolver, and the owner of that wouldn't worry about it overmuch, seeing that it is a common American

make, with thousands like it all over the United States. It would never occur to him that the weapon had a private mark, and that, of late, American small-arms makers have taken to register their sales. I don't suppose that the murderer knew anything about that."

Merrick looked a trifle less impatient.

"Well, there is that," he said.

"And another thing," Cheriton went on. "So far as we can gather, there is absolutely nothing missing from Lord Seagrane's safe. He possessed no jewels or valuables of any portable kind, and even the few pounds that he had in the safe were undisturbed. In my opinion, you won't get much further until you have ascertained what the murderer was after. It was not money and it was not jewels and, so far as we can gather, no security of any kind is missing."

Merrick, more or less graciously, conceded the point and Cheriton went quietly on his way. It seemed to him that he could have told Merrick a good deal if the latter had been more inviting in his manner, and Cheriton was not disposed to go out of his way to say anything about his discoveries. All the same, he was perfectly sure that there was a close connection between the affair of the missing jewels at the Grand Park Hotel and the tragic death of Lord Seagrane. Before long, he was going to put that issue beyond doubt and, accordingly, a day

or two later, he ran up to Town again and called on Penton.

"Well, here we are again," the scientist said.
"No, my dear boy, I have nothing fresh to tell you."

"So I expected," Cheriton replied. "But perhaps this will help you. I didn't mention it before."

With that, he took from his pocket a disc of wax which he had found on the floor of the library immediately after Lord Seagrane's death. He handed it over to Penton, who proceeded to examine it with the aid of a microscope.

"Where did you get this from?" he asked.

Cheriton proceeded to go into details.

"Well," Penton said, "this is rather a curious thing. It is exactly the same wax composition that I have found on the back of the playing cards. I should like to examine it more carefully. If you will wait here a moment or two, I will take it up to my laboratory and melt it down."

He was away for a moment or two and then returned with an eager expression on his face.

"Now this is a funny thing, Cheriton," he said. "See what I have found in the middle of that wax."

With that, Penton produced a mass of wax, more or less still in a state of flux, and lying right in the centre of it was a finger-nail. Cheriton stared at it in astonishment.

"Do you mean to say," he cried, "that you found that finger-nail in the centre of the wax?"

"Precisely. It was there, flattened out and kept flat by the wax as it cooled under pressure. Oh, you need not look at it, my boy, it is a genuine finger-nail all right and a precious ugly one at that. Now, what do you make of it?"

Cheriton shook his head. It was impossible to make anything of it. For the moment, all he could do was to stare at the thing in puzzled astonishment.

"I am done," he confessed. "Utterly knocked out. There must be a solution somewhere and possibly I may find it later on. Meanwhile the best thing I can do on the spur of the moment is to ask you to keep this thing and produce it in evidence when called upon to do so. You found it in the course of a scientific investigation and your testimony may be useful. Meanwhile, what about that introduction to Miss Carey?"

"Why not call on her?" Penton suggested. "You were told off to trace the thieves who got away with her jewels and it would be only polite to call and ask about them."

"Not at all a bad idea," Cheriton approved. "As a private individual, I could do that. Where is she?"

"Same place," Penton explained. "Grand Park Hotel."

"Really! I thought she was more or less on the rocks."

"So she was. Couldn't pay her bill a little time back and the hotel management inclined to regard the jewel robbery as a fraud. But vaudeville actresses of the Carey type can always manage to raise money sooner or later, and the fair Nance is no exception to the rule. I have an idea that some rich and infatuated American theatrical 'fan' came to the rescue. However, it is a matter that doesn't concern me—all I know is that Nance is still at the caravanserai in question, and presumably she has satisfied the authorities there and is an honoured guest—paying."

It seemed to Cheriton that the advice was sound. In the face of the recent amazing discovery, it might be just as well not to bring in Penton as an introducer to Nance Carey, the more especially as the lady was so obviously related to the very men whom Cheriton more than suspected of murder or, at any rate, was aware that such a crime had taken place. Far wiser to call upon Miss Carey as a sympathetic friend.

So, in due course, Cheriton presented himself at the Grand Park and asked if he could see Miss Carey. On hearing that she was in, he sent up his card and a little later he found himself seated in Miss Carey's private sitting-room.

"Well, I guess this is rather curious," she said as she shook hands and indicated the silver cigarette box on a table. "Do make yourself at home, Mr. Cheriton. Am I to understand that you are taking my case up again?"

"No," Cheriton explained. "I was removed by my superiors more or less in disgrace because I set those under me on what was considered a false trail. So they fired me."

"Too bad," the actress sympathized. "I wished you had gone on because I liked you, and the guy who is on the case now is not the sort one could be friendly with. What are you doing now?"

Cheriton proceeded to explain.

"And the gems are still missing?" he asked.

"Yes, and darned likely to be. However, it doesn't matter so much now, and there are plenty more where the others came from. So sit down and chat. It was real kind of you to come here in this friendly way and condole with me."

Miss Carey proved to be a witty and agreeable talker, and so Cheriton let her go on with anecdotes concerning her past life, which was just the very thing he wanted her to do. And a very hard life it seemed to be for a girl thrown on her own resources at an early age in a theatrical world of sorts.

"I was in it from a kid," she told Cheriton. "First a fairy and after that child's parts.

They go down well in the States. Then anything from Juliet to Doll Tearsheet. I have played in Shakespeare all across America, from 'Frisco to Alaska. Starved a good part of the time. I remember once the company was snowed up in the Klondike and four of our crowd died of starvation. Fact. We were dug out that time by a couple of prospectors who happened along with their dogs and sledges just in the nick of time. Good sorts, they were, you bet. It was years after that when I met one of them quite by accident in New York. I could have fallen on his neck and kissed him. But Mr. Canton just laughed . . . ”

Cheriton held himself in with an effort.

“ Ever see the other man again ? ” he asked carelessly.

“ What, Marchand ? Why, that’s curious.”

The speaker stopped suddenly and changed colour.

“ What am I talking about ? ” she laughed. “ Wonder what made me say Marchand when I never heard the name before. Simpson was the name of the other man, leastwise that’s what he called himself, only you never know out there in the back blocks.”

Cheriton allowed the correction to pass casually, as if the name held no interest for him. But he did not forget that Marchand was Seagrange’s family name and that at some time in his life the late Earl passed years prospecting

in the wilds. And here was this woman pretending she had mistaken Marchand for Simpson. This call was not going to be a waste of Cheriton's time.

" You ought to write your reminiscences," he said. " It would have a ready sale. Most stage books have. Bring it right up to date. For instance, explain how it was that you came to have that breakdown on the stage the other afternoon. I mean when the butler in the sketch handed you a copy of the *Evening Messenger*, and you ran off the stage."

" Oh, that. Well, between you and me, I saw something in the paper that upset me. Any little trifle like that puts me out when I am on the stage. It isn't worth talking about."

Cheriton fixed his eyes on the speaker.

" Are you sure, are you quite sure," he asked, " that it was not just a line you read in the stop-press edition ? "

CHAPTER XXII

NANCE CAREY seemed to stiffen as if from an electric shock. Or as if Cheriton's fixed gaze had hypnotized her.

"Why do you ask me that?" she whispered.

"We will discuss the point presently," Cheriton said. "Now did you see something in that identical newspaper that caused you to throw up your arms and rush into the wings? Mind you, this is not mere, vulgar curiosity on my part."

"But you are not a detective now," the woman parried.

"Perhaps not, but I am still more than interested in the case. The matter was taken out of my hands, and I let it go willingly. And there would have been an end of it so far as I was concerned. But in crime there are cross-currents, and very often when following up one clue the police stumble on another which is connected with a different charge altogether. And something of the sort has happened here—I mean the investigation into the loss of your gems opens up a field in a new direction."

"Can't you put it a little more plainly?" Miss Carey asked.

"All in good time. So far as I am personally concerned, the loss of your valuables ceased to interest me as soon as I was taken off the case. And I am inclined to believe that Scotland Yard takes the same view, being more or less convinced that you never lost any valuables at all. In other words, that the whole thing was nothing more than an advertising stunt."

For some reason, for the moment puzzling to Cheriton, Nance Carey shed her anxiety and nervousness like a garment. The pleasant smile returned and she was herself again.

"Well, you *are* clever!" she exclaimed admiringly. "Now how on earth did you stumble on that?"

"Am I to understand that it is a true bill?" Cheriton asked with a corresponding smile. "You are by no means the first lady on the stage to lose gems that never existed."

"Oh, I know it is an old dodge," Miss Carey admitted coolly. She was quite at her ease now. "Now I am going to let you into a secret. When I decided to come to England I did so because there was a reason. I had worked up quite a big following in the States and better things were ahead, when it became imperative that I should quit America and try my fortunes here. I said nothing to anyone and just came. I felt sure that my reputation on the other side would win me engagements here, so I had no anxiety as to the future in

that way. But I had saved no money—we people on the stage seldom do—and after paying my passage I had practically nothing left besides the emerald that I pawned to pay my hotel bill. When the money I raised on the emerald was gone, which was much quicker than I had expected, I wrote to an admirer in America, asking for the necessary dollars. But I realized that two or three weeks would have to elapse and I had to bluff those jays at the hotel in the meantime. Get me?"

All with the perfect ease and assurance and, withal, carrying no suggestion of the professional adventuress behind it.

"And I presume the money came," Cheriton smiled.

"You betcher. And why not? When a man wants to marry a woman as badly as my beau wants to wed me, there's nothing in it on the dollar question. And if he happens to be a few years younger than me, that's his funeral, Mr. Cheriton."

"Quite," Cheriton agreed. "Then may I take the liberty of congratulating you on the happy event?"

"Well, I ain't so sure," Miss Carey said thoughtfully. "I'd like to quit the stage, but there's an obstacle in the path."

"Meaning that you are married already?"

"Something like that. Of course, in America one can easily get round that, but the man I

married when I was seventeen gave me such a sickener of matrimony that I decided that one venture of the kind was enough for me. And now I ain't so sure. If it wasn't for my lil' gal I wouldn't think twice."

"Your daughter, Miss Carey? Is she with you, here?"

"No, she isn't. She's with friends in America who know how to look after her, and if her father tries on any of his dirty tricks he's likely to bump into a heap of trouble."

This with a fierce intonation that spoke of tragedy and storm in the past of the actress.

"She is evidently very dear to you," Cheriton murmured.

"I'll tell the world she is. Mind you, I cared for her father when she was born and I suppose that makes a difference. But she's a sweet kid and lovely as a star. It was only lately that her father got in touch with her again and that was more by accident than anything else. It just happened. And he wanted the child. Told me he should claim her unless I listened to what he had to say. You can imagine what an asset, as he called it, she would be in the house of a man who gets his living by card-sharpening and luring young men with money to drink the sort of dope he obtains for the purpose. But I fought—fought like a tiger cat, I did. She thinks that her father is dead

because he never told her what was the relationship between them."

Nance Carey spoke rapidly with all the fire and force of one who has suffered and knows herself to be in the right. In a way Cheriton felt his heart warming towards her.

"And, in the end, you won?" he suggested.

"You bet I did. The child is safe now. And to make assurance doubly sure, I came over here. And here I am."

"You must have had a hard life," Cheriton said.

Nance's laugh had a tinge of bitterness in it.

"I should worry," she said. "Well, what do you expect, brought up as I was, without a single friend in the world. And I haven't done so badly, either. I was getting a hundred and fifty dollars a week when I quit the States, and—"

"But I am not quite sure why you left America," Cheriton interrupted.

"Well, I told you, didn't I? I ran away from my husband. He was after me for two reasons: first of all, to get a hold on the kid and, secondly, for as much of my salary as he could lay his hooks on. And there was something else. But I guess we needn't go into that, Mr. Detective."

Cheriton murmured something that sounded like agreement with this sentiment, but, all the same, there was a great deal of information that Nance Carey could give him and he was

not going to leave her until he had extracted the last bit.

"Go on," he said. "I am very interested."

"In my life, you mean?" Nance asked.
"Now, where was I? What was I telling you just now?"

"You were telling me just now," Cheriton said in his softest, most insinuating manner, "something about a man you called Simpson. But you didn't say it was Simpson to begin with, you said it was Marchand. Now, look here, Miss Carey, I may no longer be a detective, but I have a most powerful reason for playing my old game in connection with the death of a man for whom I had a liking that amounted to affection. I mean Lord Seagrane, who was murdered the other day. When you saw that brief paragraph in the stop-press edition of the *Messenger*, you were so moved by it that you rushed from the stage and were unable to go on with your part. I was certain of that, because I could not find anywhere in the *Messenger* a word, other than those I have just mentioned, calculated to upset you. Therefore, you must not be surprised that I was rather struck just now when the word Marchand slipped out and you immediately corrected it to Simpson. Now, you might just as well admit, without further cross-examination on my part, that at one time in your life you met the late Earl. And you met him in company

with his partner, Canton, who was the father of Andrew Canton with whom I saw you lunching at a restaurant in Soho a day or two ago. You won't deny that."

A long, deep sigh escaped Nance's lips.

"I guess you are too many for me," she said.
"You think I am shielding somebody."

"I am absolutely sure you are," Cheriton said.

"Well, what if I am?" the woman asked defiantly. "Why should I be dragged into this affair?"

"My dear lady," Cheriton responded soothingly, "I have not the least desire to drag you into it. But if it is publicity that is troubling you, I give you my word that your name shall be kept out of the case altogether. Let us consider the position. Lord Seagrane was murdered in his library by some scoundrel who was out, not to rob him of jewels or money, because there was nothing missing. What the man was after, we don't know, but he was after something, and I am very much afraid that he got it. I don't think for a moment that he meant to kill Seagrane, but that is another question altogether. Of course, you have read all about the case."

"So far as it has gone," Nance murmured.

"Yes, I can see you have. And I have more than a suspicion that you can tell us a thing or two which may lead to the arrest of the actual

murderer. Do you happen to know anything of a man called Bradman, or, alternately, an individual named Cleaver ? ”

Just for a moment, Nance Carey made no reply. Cheriton could see by the heaving of her chest and the whitening of her lips that his question had shaken the woman to the core.

“ Why do you ask ? ” she fenced.

“ I might retort, why don’t you reply ? ” Cheriton said. “ But I am not going to force you to say anything you don’t want to. But this I can tell you—a few days before Lord Seagrane’s death, two men calling themselves Bradman and Cleaver came down to Sandchester Golf Links, ostensibly on a holiday. They were extraordinarily poor players and hardly the type one expects to see on a championship course like Sandchester. They posed as two rich colonials from Australia. All the same, I didn’t believe it, because, you see, I spent a year in America in connection with my detective work and learnt the language. More than once I have heard those two men glibly using phrases which can only have emanated from a native-born Yankee. Now, would you mind telling me if you know anything of either of these men ? ”

It seemed to Cheriton that the woman was fighting for time. She looked at him with an expression in her eyes that one sees in those of a hunted animal.

“ There is no hurry,” Cheriton said. “ Per-

haps we had better go back to your own life-story."

Once more, Nance Carey breathed freely.

"Well, I told you something of that," she said. "I told you how I travelled all over the American continent, from San Francisco to Alaska, getting a bare living, and sometimes worse than that. It was a struggle in those early days and, all the more so, because the man I married was a waster and a loafer, and would never have been employed with the company I joined if I hadn't sort of pulled him through. He drank, too, and I bear the marks of his ill-treatment to this day. But somehow I clung to him, as women do. Funny, isn't it, Mr. Cheriton, how a woman will give her heart for a blackguard to tear, when another one values a good husband less than her Peke. But there came a time when I couldn't stand it any longer, and when the child was growing a bigish girl, I was lucky enough to find friends who, more or less, adopted her. They were rich and powerful friends and I knew that her future was assured. I thought, too, that I was clear of my husband; but he turned up at intervals and I had to give him nearly all I earned to get rid of him. Then he managed to find the child and get in conversation with her, not saying who he was, but making up his mind that she would help him in one of his disgraceful undertakings. And he actually dared to come

to me and make the suggestion that I should get the child back and all link up together in a swell apartment in New York, where young fools with money could be lured to play cards for big stakes. And I need hardly tell you that the child was to be the lure. She is nearly twenty now, and a prettier and more fascinating girl there isn't in the States."

"And, of course, you refused," Cheriton said.

"Refused? Of course I did! This was in Alaska, where my husband had come with one or two others of his own sort, partly to see me and partly prospecting. If you have any idea what the climate is like out there, you can imagine the state in which our company found themselves from time to time. And that is where I met Major Canton and his friend Simpson."

"Call him Marchand," Cheriton said.

"Oh, very well, Marchand, if you like. It is a good many years ago, and perhaps I have forgotten. Well, as I said, they helped us out of a tight place, and when things had improved a bit we saw those two from time to time. We were up amongst the silver and copper mines, and our audience consisted principally of prospectors from all over the world. Of course, amongst these were Major Canton and Lord Seagrange. I didn't know he was Lord Seagrange then, and he didn't know it himself. And I should not have known about it now if I hadn't

read a lot about it in the papers about a year ago. A romance of the peerage and all that sort of thing. You can imagine their headlines. And when I read all that, I knew that my Mr. Marchand and the Earl were one and the same person. Not that I thought much of it at the time, because I never expected to hear of Lord Seagrane again, much less to see him personally."

"Oh, then you met him here?"

"No, I didn't. He was pointed out to me in the grill-room of a London hotel as the centre figure in a story, and directly I looked at him, I recognized him. But, mind you, he came very near to losing that big fortune of his."

"Oh!" Cheriton murmured gently. "Oh!"

"Yes, indeed," Miss Carey went on. "You see, Major Canton had one weakness. He drank. It was only at long intervals, but when he did break out, he went fairly on the bust. I expect that is why he had to leave the British Army. Just about the time I am speaking of, the partners had located what looked like a gold claim and Major Canton was left on guard whilst Seagrane came down country with the dogs to get some tools. You see, they were a pretty tough lot up there, and if they had both come down together, somebody would have jumped their claim. Eventually, Seagrane got back only just in time. There was a fine dust

up, with revolver shooting and all the rest of it, but the two Englishmen held their own and it seems that they had struck the richest claim found in Alaska for years. And even then, mind you, it was touch and go, because the Major had one of his fits on and it took Seagrane all his time to restrain him. Seagrane's idea was to keep to himself in his tent, together with his partner, and fight shy of the gang that was always hanging around Jerry Costigan's saloon. But one night, Canton insisted upon going down for a drink and the friends came to blows over it. It was the first time they ever quarrelled and I knew that Seagrane felt it very much. He was so disgusted that he let Canton go and he went. But he never came back."

" You mean that he disappeared ? " Cheriton asked.

" No, sir," Nance Carey said impressively. " He didn't. In the saloon, he got boasting and quarrelling in his cups and in the trouble that followed he was shot through the heart. There wasn't any inquest or proceedings or anything of that sort, because they don't worry over a shooting in far Alaska, where the law don't count. But Seagrane was very much distressed and blamed himself severely because he had allowed his partner to go, knowing pretty well what might be likely to happen. But all his sorrow couldn't bring Canton back again, and Seagrane had to make the best of it. He got

one or two people round him and, in the course of a few weeks, made his fortune and sold his claim to a syndicate. But he told me, the last time I saw him, that he should never cease to blame himself for the way he had let his friend go, though, candidly, I can't see what he had to reproach himself with."

"And that was the last time you saw him?"

"Yes. Till he was pointed out to me in the restaurant the other day. I had meant to renew our acquaintance, if possible, but that was not to be. And that is about all I can tell you with regard to Lord Seagrane and his fortune."

"It doesn't seem to help much," Cheriton said. "Still, it is interesting and throws a side light on Seagrane's character and also explains certain remarks he made to me with regard to an incident in his life which he inferred that he had never ceased to regret. I suppose that is what he meant."

"Yes, he was just like that," Nance agreed.

"Is there anything else I can tell you?"

"I am wondering," Cheriton said, though, indeed, he was not wondering at all. "Oh yes, did you ever happen to hear of a matter called the Test case?"

Once more, Nance Carey changed colour. Once more her lips whitened and her face assumed a tense expression.

"Why are you asking me this?" she inquired.

"We will come to that presently," Cheriton said. "Now, do you happen to know anything about the case in question?"

"Of course I do," Nance admitted. "It was in connection with a robbery of jewels and plate from a great mansion in Alabama. Casterville was the town, which is in the centre of the cotton belt, and the owner was an exceedingly rich man of good family which had been established there for over two hundred years. I forget his name for the moment, but we will call him Smith, if you like. Mr. Smith had married a society wife, a well-known American beauty from New York, where she had been accustomed to mix with what you people call the cream of society. Smith was very fond of his wife and nothing was too good for her. As a very rich man, he could give her anything she required and that is how she came to possess such a store of jewels. Everybody in America knew all about them and you can imagine how the swell crooks hankered after a haul like that. And two of them laid a plan to get hold of the lot. It was an elaborate plan, involving a good deal of trouble and expense, and was all the more difficult, because Mrs. Smith was very popular with her servants, amongst whom she reckoned a good many negroes. Of course, there is no slavery in the United States now, but the old traditions are very hard to break, and the Smiths had lived

on their property for generations. Therefore, there were a lot of native servants about who were devoted to their master and mistress. It is no exaggeration to say that some of them would have died for them. And these were a danger to the robbers and had to be got rid of. So those two thieves hit upon an ingenious plan. They didn't try to rob the house out and out, because they knew that that would be a failure. But they did contrive to get hold of some of Mrs. Smith's minor jewellery and hide it in the quarters of some of the coloured servants. An anonymous letter did the rest and the servants, without any fuss or bother, were moved outside the house. And then came the robbery, which was a failure. The thieves managed to get clear, though, for some hours, they were actually in the hands of the police and their lawyer managed to save their skins for them by eliciting the fact that valuables were missed in the house and found in the servants' quarters. The lawyers maintained that the two thieves were caught in circumstances that pointed to them having lost their way, and seeing that they hadn't got their hands actually on the gems and that Mr. Smith could not deny the speculations of his servants, the crooks were discharged. Of course, their lawyer knew all about the anonymous letter, because his clients told him, they having sent it themselves. That is the story."

"But why all the press agitation?" Cheriton asked.

"Well, there wasn't so very much," Nance explained. "It was the Alabama newspaper the *Freespeaker* that took the matter up and proclaimed it to be a gross miscarriage of justice."

"Yes, I am aware of that," Cheriton said. "When I was examining your steel-lined suitcase during the time I had your affair in hand, I found a newspaper containing two photographs and underneath were the words, 'The Test Case. A Gross Miscarriage of Justice.' Now, Miss Carey, I am asking you a plain question. I want to know which of the two men whose photographs are given happens to be your husband."

Nance Carey turned a frightened gaze on the speaker.

"You are too clever for me," she whispered. "My husband is the tall man with the black hair and moustache."

CHAPTER XXIII

WITH the admission as to the identity of the tall man in the newspaper photograph with her rascally husband, Nance Carey burst into a flood of tears. Cheriton stood by helplessly until the storm subsided and the actress wiped her eyes.

"I feel better now," she gulped. "I was more than a fool to leave that paper about. I had it long ago when the case first attracted attention and somehow it got into my belongings. I must have used it unconsciously for packing purposes. Don't tell me that my husband is mixed up in the Seagrane Holt business."

"I never said anything of the kind," Cheriton evaded. "But one must explore every avenue —that is, speaking as a detective. It's too bad to worry you like this, anyway."

But Cheriton was not feeling that the long interview had been wasted when he took his leave and in due course returned to his cottage. He would have to think things over before he made his next move and he was not disposed to hurry matters. He knew now, at any rate, the history of poor Seagrane's secret and how

he had regarded his lapse on the night of Major Canton's death as a real betrayal of his friend and partner. It was an exaggerated view, but Seagrane had not looked at it in that light. Hence his determination to make up to the son what he had more or less deprived the father of in the way of fortune.

But had recent events and Canton's behaviour of late caused Seagrane to change his mind shortly before his tragic end? And, if so, had Andrew Canton in some way learnt of this? It was possible that the quarrel over the money-lender had been only one of a series of such scenes between the two and perhaps a hint let drop by Seagrane of his change of view. And then Cheriton suddenly remembered that Eccles, the butler, also his wife, the cook, had witnessed a remoter document than the will. And, further, Seagrane had been more reticent about this than he had been over his will, which he spoke of, as such, to those two trusted servants.

Probably this was a codicil, the contents of which would not arouse Canton's curiosity—he was far too careless to ask himself any questions of that sort.

So far as it was possible to judge, nobody seemed to benefit by the murder, presuming that the safe in the library contained no article of value that was missing. No priceless gem or something of that kind, not even bank-notes or negotiable securities. And if Canton was in

any way connected with that dreadful business, then the last thing in the world he would want to steal and destroy would be the document that placed him in possession of Seagrane and a princely income. And yet . . .

There might be—there probably were—incidents in Canton's recent career that he was more than anxious to conceal from his old benefactor. Indeed, exploits like these could well be used by the blackmailing fraternity whose business it is to keep a careful watch on the doings of young men of fortune like Andrew Canton. There would be scores of that type of scoundrel well aware that Canton had become the heir of the late Lord Seagrane. And, if he had made a bad slip, why, then . . .

Perhaps it would be as well to caution Canton and at least learn from him where he pawned the Holbein and where he spent the night of the murder. If he could satisfactorily account for his time that tragic night, then he would be secure from the unpleasant attentions of Inspector Merrick, who was almost certain to subject him to a pretty rigid cross-examination.

And, strangely enough, this sort of a theory was uppermost in Cheriton's mind when he met Merrick a few hours later.

" You seem disgruntled, Merrick," he said. " I'm afraid that I shall have to give you a hand, after all."

" Many thanks," Merrick said sourly. " All

the same I shall be sincerely grateful if you will refrain from butting in. You may form what theories you like so long as you don't act on them. You clever amateurs are the curse of the profession. How many times has one of you scared off the bird when it was almost in the net by some silly-ass trick or another? So you keep off it."

"I'll keep off your trail at any rate," Cheriton said. "All the same, I have my ideas. But have you made a move?"

"Have I made a move?" the Inspector shouted. "I should smile, as the Yanks say. Only this is entirely between ourselves. One thing, you always did know how to keep your mouth shut. I know the name of the man who left the revolver in his lordship's library. How's that for a start?"

"Congratulations," Cheriton murmured. "May I be permitted to hear some of the details?"

He knew he was going to get those details almost without asking, so puffed up was the Inspector and so full of self-importance. After all, it was only one detective speaking to another.

"It was like this," Merrick said. "I had the weapon you found photographed. Then it was taken to pieces by a practical gunsmith and the sections were photographed in detail and the whole lot transmitted by photo-telephone across

the Atlantic. Once the transmission was in the hands of the New York police, it didn't take them long to trace the gun to the makers and thence to Chicago, in which city the actual seller had a shop. As they have taken lately in America to register the sale of firearms, the purchaser was located. That gun was sold to a man known as 'Thumbscrew Jake.' He probably had another name, but the police can't say what that name is—not that it matters much."

Cheriton appeared to be following the story with the keenest interest, as, indeed, he was. But there was nothing on his face to show Merrick that he had heard the name before, and that from Merrick himself.

"That was smart of you, Merrick," he said. "Did you get any details of the gentleman in question?"

"Yes, the cablegram was pretty comprehensive. A big chap who has a heavy moustache and beard. Not that that helps much, as he is probably without both by this time. But he has one peculiarity, which is that he is minus the top joint of his right thumb. This is why he is called Thumbscrew Jake. He was in the murder gang in Chicago for a short time and then vanished. They say that he digs that blunted thumb into the throat of his victim and so leaves a mark that puzzled the doctors for a long time."

" Sounds like a nasty brute," Cheriton said thoughtfully. " Just the last man in the world you would like to meet in the dark. So you think he is in England, Merrick ? "

" Well, either he is or some brother crook just pinched his gun," Merrick replied. " If he was the man who was in his lordship's library on that night, it ought to be easy to hunt him down through his missing thumb. And yet I am not so satisfied that he is the individual I require, as the old song says. There is another man I am keeping an eye on."

" What, another one ! " Cheriton cried in mock alarm, though he knew perfectly well who Merrick was alluding to. " You amaze me, old preceptor. Do you mean to say that there were two of the murderers and not one alone ? "

" I should not be at all surprised," Merrick said. " And I think I have told you too much already."

" My dear chap," Cheriton said. " I think your memory must be failing. A sad thing for a detective."

" What on earth do you mean ? " Merrick demanded.

" Well, my dear fellow, you told me that story about Thumbscrew Jake before. Don't you remember ? "

" By Jove, so I did," Merrick said, for him, a little diffidently. " But then, I was only

leading up to the climax when you interrupted me. I believe I could tell as good a magazine story as you. The climax, as a matter of fact, lies in the statement that Thumbscrew Jake has been seen in England and identified."

"Do you mean by yourself?"

"No, I don't," Merrick said. "I mean that one of the Yard men with a description of Jake in his possession claims to have spotted him down in the East End. And when I came to discuss the matter, I came to the conclusion that he was right. At any rate, he has got on the trail of a man who has lost the top of his right thumb and who answers pretty correctly to the description of Thumbscrew Jake."

"Oh, then in that case your work is practically finished."

"Oh, I won't say that. All I have done up to now is to establish that Thumbscrew Jake's revolver was found in Lord Seagrane's library, following his death, and, unless the man can prove to me that he parted with that weapon to somebody else, then I have got a very strong case against him. Now, I dare say you will conclude from that that I am concentrating entirely upon this American ruffian. But I am not."

"That's right," Cheriton said approvingly. "Never neglect one clue because another one appears to be particularly strong. Who is the other man you are alluding to?"

"I don't mind telling you. I wonder you haven't spotted him yourself."

"Well, go on," Cheriton said impatiently.

"Well, I mean Andrew Canton. Who benefits by the death of Lord Seagrane? So far as I can see, nobody else but Canton. It is common knowledge in the village that the old gentleman more or less adopted Canton because he was the son of his lordship's late partner. From inquiries I have made, I have discovered that two servants at Seagrane Holt witnessed his lordship's will, and it seems to be generally understood that, under that document, Canton came into everything."

"That is perfectly right," Cheriton agreed. "Lord Seagrane told me so himself. He also told Mrs. Marchand and her daughter. You are on firm ground there."

"Of course I am," Merrick went on. "But from what I can ascertain, there was a good deal of friction before the old gentleman died between himself and his heir. Gambling debts and all that kind of thing. And if that wasn't bad enough, Canton has got into the hands of the blackmailers. He is rash and headstrong and extremely prodigal with his money, which is what you might expect from a brainless youth who suddenly found himself lifted from poverty into riches. Just the type of youth that the swell mob in London mark down for easy prey. And he was, because he was in London more

than half his time, and drifted into the company of a set of men who have been under the observation of the police for years. There is a matter of a man and a woman who work together for the express purpose of compromising wealthy youths through the medium of the female. It is quite an old game, and you know as much about it as I do. I have every reason to believe that, for some time past, Canton has been foolishly paying hush money to the male bird. If he had come to us, we could have put an end to the whole thing in five minutes. But, of course, that is the last thing a fool like young Canton would do."

"All this is news to me," Cheriton said.

"But it is a fact, all the same."

Cheriton was quite prepared to believe it. If these facts were correct, and he saw no reason to doubt it, then it would account for a great deal that was puzzling him."

"And that isn't all," Merrick continued.

"On the day of Lord Seagrane's death, Canton went off, as he said, to play a day's golf at Sandwich and spend a night with a friend there. As a matter of fact, he did nothing of the kind. He sneaked off up to London, I believe with the object of raising money. He did raise money at a certain picture dealer's in Upperton Street. I haven't ascertained yet what the security was, but I know that the owner of the business lent him some hundreds of pounds. And I

know that, two days later, the young man was just as hard up as ever. Can't you see the temptation he had to get rid of his benefactor? It wouldn't be the first time that such a thing had happened where a young man desperately in need of money and an old gentleman who held the purse-strings were concerned."

"I think I see what you are driving at," Cheriton said. "You think that Canton came back to Seagrane Holt very late on the evening of the crime, and that when everybody supposed he was in London, he was actually in the house. Mind you, he could have come home and got into Seagrane Holt without anybody being a bit the wiser, because he knew the place as the back of his hand and he was aware of the movements of the servants and all that sort of thing. Then he could have left the premises—"

"Precisely," Merrick interrupted.

"Oh, not quite as precise as all that," Cheriton said. "You absolutely ignore the fact that I myself was at grips with the actual murderer, and should have downed him if the rubber glove he was wearing had not come away in my hand."

"Very likely. I give you all that," Merrick said. "But it doesn't follow that the man you got hold of actually fired the shot. Let us suppose, for a moment, that Canton had a confederate. He is known to be in desperate need of money and that confederate would naturally

belong to the gang that was blackmailing him. The confederate would be an expert in safe-breaking and, of course, it was he who opened it. He opened it so that Canton could get something out of the safe which could be turned into cash. Mind you, this is only theory, but I want you to understand that I have two strings to my bow."

For some time, Merrick continued in the same strain before Cheriton could manage to get rid of him and went thoughtfully on his way towards Seagrane Holt.

And he had, indeed, much food for thought at that moment. He did not believe that there was anything sound in Merrick's theory as to Canton having an actual hand in the crime. He might have fallen so low and been so desperately in need of money as to allow himself to be persuaded into a safe robbery with a view to getting hold of certain valuable securities which could be turned into cash. And then the unexpected had happened and Lord Seagrane had appeared in the library at the very moment when Canton and his companion were getting away with their spoil. It was fairly plain, at any rate, that the actual deed of violence was not a premeditated one. Seagrane had forced the hand of the criminals and, by the impetuous way in which he had attacked the man with the india-rubber glove, had brought about his own destruction. It was

possible, therefore, that Canton had imported a professional burglar into the house, never dreaming for a moment of the tragic consequences to follow.

It was rather a desperate resolve, but it seemed necessary to warn Canton of what was hanging over him. Not for a single moment did Cheriton believe that Canton had gone so far as to take the life of his benefactor. But if he persisted in sticking to the story of his visit to Sandwich and told that to Merrick, then he might find himself almost within the shadow of the rope.

So far as Cheriton had been able to ascertain, Merrick had not yet had speech with Canton. He would probably not take that step yet, because, before doing so, he would want to make absolutely sure of his ground. If his conclusions were correct, then his intention was to see Canton without delay and warn him.

But Canton was not to be found at Seagrane Holt and, therefore, Cheriton went across to the Golf Club to find him. He was not at the club-house either, but was finally run to earth in the smoking-room of the Dormy House, where he was playing bridge with Cleaver and two visitors. So far, there was no sign whatever of the man Bradman.

Cheriton waited until his opportunity came and Canton had his cards on the table as dummy, and then quietly he told him that he

had something serious to say which would be communicated to Canton downstairs as soon as the rubber was finished. Canton frowned and was half inclined to ignore the request, but something in the expression of Cheriton's face alarmed him and he muttered to the effect that he would come directly.

"Oh, all right," he said. "Seems to me I can never get a moment's peace nowadays. There is always something serious the matter."

Down below, Cheriton had a few words with old James, the steward, and then casually asked if he had seen anything of Mr. Bradman in the last few days.

"No, sir, I haven't," James said. "He went up to London a day or so after that shocking affair at Seagrane Holt and he hasn't returned yet."

"You mean that he has left altogether, eh?"

"Oh dear, no, sir," James explained. "I know he is coming back, because Mr. Cleaver told me so. Seems as his friend has got some worrying business in London connected with his Australian property which he could not neglect."

The information was quite sufficient for Cheriton for the moment, for he turned and waited until Canton, in no amiable frame of mind, joined him.

"Well, what's it all about?" the latter demanded.

Cheriton led the way outside and began what he had to say, whilst Canton listened sulkily.

"It's like this," Cheriton said. "You know what I was before I came down here and you may, or may not, be aware of the fact that I was at Scotland Yard with Inspector Merrick as my chief. You know who I mean—the man who has the murder case in hand."

"Oh, that hangdog brute," Canton growled.

"Well, you can call him that if you like. He and I are on fairly friendly terms and he has kept me informed of the result of his investigations. I may tell you, in confidence, that he has made some exceedingly important discoveries. Before I go any further, I am going to ask you a question."

"And I may not be disposed to answer it."

"Oh, I think you will," Cheriton said. "To begin with, did you ever hear of a man named Thumbscrew Jake?"

Canton's expression of bland surprise was so frank and open that when he said the name conveyed nothing to him Cheriton had no difficulty in believing it.

"Oh well," he said. "That is satisfactory as far as it goes. Now, when a detective has a case like this in hand, he naturally suspects everybody. He would suspect his own mother if she happened to be within a mile of the scene of the crime, and that is why you have not escaped observation."

"But, my dear chap!" Canton protested.

"Yes, I know all about that. All I want to do is to warn you to be perfectly open and frank when you come to be cross-examined by Merrick, as you will be. Now, you told me and Mrs. Marchand that you had gone off to play golf with a friend at Sandwich and were spending the night with him. To put it bluntly, that was a lie. You went to London with the intention of raising enough money to pay what you lost to Bradman and Cleaver and you were going to borrow—in fact, you did borrow the cash on the security of a picture that you took out of the house."

"How do you know that?" Canton demanded.

"Oh, never mind how I know it. Frankly, between ourselves, is that true or not?"

"Well, it is," Canton said, as if the words had been dragged from him. "I was in a devil of a mess and didn't know what to do. I dared not go to the old man, so I took a risk. But most of this you know already."

"Yes," Cheriton said impressively. "But the serious point is that Merrick knows it as well. And he knows that you are mixed up with one of the most dangerous blackmailing gangs in London. As a victim, of course. Now, whatever you do when Merrick comes to talk to you, as he will, for Heaven's sake tell him the truth. If you try and prevaricate,

you will very likely find yourself behind prison walls for a more or less indefinite period, charged with the murder of Lord Seagrane. Now, if you like, you can go back to your bridge again."

With that, Cheriton turned on his heel, leaving the unhappy Canton staring after him and made his way to Seagrane Holt with the object of seeing Evelyn again.

But in this he was disappointed. Both Mrs. Marchand and Evelyn were out, but on the hall table was a telegram addressed to Cheriton which he proceeded to tear open.

It was from Penton and ran as follows :

"Important developments. Made great discovery. Come up and see me without delay."

An hour later, Cheriton had caught a late train and was on his way to see Penton in London.

CHAPTER XXIV

CHERITON had a good deal to occupy his mind during his journey to London. First of all, there was that ten or twelve minutes' conversation he had had with Evelyn just after he had ordered the car to take him to the station. He was standing in the hall with Penton's telegram in his hand and a preoccupied look on his face when Evelyn appeared and, to his surprise, he saw that she had been crying.

He had never seen Evelyn give way to a weakness like that before, though, in the past, there had been many occasions when she had been tried to the uttermost. So that he was deeply concerned and showed it plainly enough.

"Whatever is the matter?" he asked. "Tell me, Evelyn—there ought to be no secrets between us just now. I have got to go to London almost at once on important business connected with our tragic mystery, but I can give you ten minutes. If there is anything wrong, please let me know."

Evelyn looked at him with her frank, open gaze.

"It isn't that, Clifford," she said. "I have been thinking. Now, you know why I am here and how mother and myself came. And you

know what was in the back of the dear old gentleman's mind."

Cheriton's face hardened a little.

"Unfortunately, I do," he said. "But I don't think that you are bound to sacrifice the happiness of a lifetime merely for the sake of a sentiment."

"No, I feel that myself," Evelyn said. "But there are other considerations. You remember what you told me the other day as to what was likely to happen to this beautiful old place and all our benefactor's money in case he happened to die without a will. I feel sure that he did."

"Well, it certainly looks like it," Cheriton admitted.

"That is just what I think. Andrew Canton would be more or less a beggar and will have to go back to work and earn his own living, which he really is not capable of doing. And mother and myself will be comparatively rich. That is what is troubling me. Do you really think that during the last two or three weeks of his life our benefactor was altering his attitude towards the son of his late partner? I know he always used to hint at some episode in his life of which he was ashamed. And I always had the impression that, in some way, this wrong was connected with Major Canton."

With his knowledge that such was actually the case, Cheriton said nothing. He had found out

all about the episode in the gambling saloon years before more or less by accident and there was nothing to be gained by repeating the story. So far as he was concerned, Evelyn would never hear it.

"I am inclined to agree with you there," he said. "And I am more inclined to agree with you that Lord Seagrane intended to make a change with regard to the property. My impression is that he destroyed his will and was going to make another one at an early date. He might have done so, because there was a document, witnessed by Eccles and his wife, the contents of which they know nothing. It is strange that that paper disappeared on the top of the mystery of the missing will. Still, the will might have been put on the fire and the other paper with it. I can't see any reason why the murderer wanted to get hold of the will, because, in any case, he couldn't benefit by it. If he suppressed it, everything went to the State, and if he dared to come forward with it in his possession, he would stand a very strong chance of being hanged."

"Yes, I can see that," Evelyn said. "But I am perfectly sure that the dear old man never intended Seagrane Holt and the income attached to it to go to the State."

"Of course not," Cheriton exclaimed. "My point is that he destroyed his will before he had made another. That sort of thing has happened over and over again."

"Then you don't think——" Evelyn hesitated.

"You might just as well say it," Cheriton smiled. "You were going to say I didn't think that, in the light of recent events, the poor old chap's original scheme was intended to materialize. He told me it was a dream and he hoped it would not turn out to be a nightmare."

"I don't quite follow you," Evelyn said.

"Well, the dream was to see Andrew Canton as master of Seagrane Holt and all its revenue with you as its mistress. That was the dream, and, through it, Seagrane hoped to make good some wrong that he had done in the past. But I am convinced in my mind, of late, that he began to see how unfair it was to try and plan others' lives for them. It doesn't matter whether Andrew Canton has to go back to work or not. To my mind, it is the best thing that could happen to him. He is headstrong and reckless and a born gambler. He would have made ducks and drakes with the estate and, sooner or later, Seagrane Holt would have had to be sold for the benefit of his creditors. And you are not going to marry him Evelyn; indeed, I don't think that you could do anything of the kind. I don't see you giving your hand where your heart did not follow. Besides, why should you subject yourself to a life of misery and suffering for the sake of a mere sentiment? And a very sloppy sentiment at that, I consider."

"I don't know what to do," Evelyn said.

"It isn't what you want to do, it is what you ought to do, and you know that as well as I do. And don't forget this. If you carry out the old gentleman's wishes, then you will have a husband who is living on you. My child, I am going to ask you a very plain question. Has he ever made love to you?"

"No, I should hardly call it that," Evelyn said. "I think he likes and admires me, and there are sides to his character that I find rather attractive. But love on either side in the best sense of the word, no."

"I think that ends it, then," Cheriton said. "Why should you keep Andrew Canton? I am sure your mother doesn't want to, and she will come into all the available capital that Mr. Prendergast told me about. And that will be over a hundred thousand pounds. But you can touch none of it till your mother's death, which, in the ordinary course of events, will not be for many years. Everything else will go to the State."

"It is all very distressing," Evelyn sighed. "But I am glad we have had this little talk."

"So am I," Cheriton smiled. "Because, my dear Evelyn, there is only one man in the world you are going to marry and that man is myself."

Cheriton had not intended to betray his feelings in this fashion, but, at the same time, he was strongly opposed to Evelyn sacrificing

herself for what might be, from her womanly point of view, a sense of duty. He saw the colour flame in her cheeks and the moisture in her eyes. It was as if he had suddenly told her something that she had been dimly conscious of for some time, some vision which had become a reality. And she knew in that moment, what she had concealed from herself, womanlike, for a long time that from the very first there had never been anyone for her but the man by her side.

It was a moment of great temptation for Cheriton, but he brushed it on one side. There was no reason why he should not speak now, since Seagrane's dream had turned out to be the nightmare he feared, and there was no reason why Evelyn should sacrifice herself for the sake of a gambler and a spendthrift. If it were possible for Seagrane to look down and see what was going on below, then Cheriton was convinced that he would smile approval on the new order of things.

"We will talk about this when I come back from London," he said. "I can't stay another moment now. And don't you forget what I have told you."

With that, he stepped into the car and drove to the station. In the train, where he had a compartment to himself, he sat for some time turning his conversation with Evelyn over in his mind. And then, with an effort, he put

her altogether on one side and concentrated on the problem before him.

There was a good deal to go upon, and much that fitted in with the theory he had formed at the back of his mind. To begin with, he knew now that Bradman, as he called himself, was Nance Carey's husband. He knew also, that the individual in question was fully cognisant of certain episodes in the life of the late Lord Seagrane. Those episodes centred around a fight for a fortune, in which Seagrane had won, though he had more or less sacrificed his partner in the process. That, however, was merely a personal view of the late Earl and one for which no ordinary individual could have unduly blamed him.

There was no getting away from the fact that Bradman and his accomplice Cleaver knew all about the past of Seagrane and, for some reason or other, had followed him to England and, in due course, had taken them to their headquarters at the Dormy House at Sand-chester. Whether or not they had met the late Earl face to face or whether he knew of their presence in the neighbourhood, it was impossible to say. It may have been that Seagrane knew of the presence of those two men; but, if so, he kept the knowledge to himself, probably because the twain were connected with what he had regarded as a blot upon his honour. That is, they must have known all about the

gambling saloon episode and the death of Cantón's father.

But of one thing Cheriton was certain. It was no mere accident that brought Bradman and Cleaver to Sandchester. They were after something, and what that something was Cheriton would have given a year's income to know. Certainly not jewels or valuables, because nothing in that line was missing. And here was the knot in the problem he had to solve.

He found Penton awaiting him and immediately the latter began to go into details.

"I only found out certain things this morning," he said. "And when I did make an important discovery, I thought I would wire you at once. I have been very busy lately, and it was only last night that I had an hour or two to spare and went into the matter of that wax disc you left behind. You remember my showing you a finger-nail that I found in it?"

"I don't think I am likely to forget," Cheriton smiled. "But what is this going to lead up to?"

"Well, this," Penton said impressively. "That nail was a thumb-nail and it was not in the wax by accident. It was part of the artificial top joint of a right-hand thumb. I can establish that beyond the shadow of a doubt."

Cheriton breathed a little more quickly, for the name of Thumbscrew Jake flashed into his mind.

CHAPTER XXV

"HOW did you establish that?" he asked.
"Well, it was like this," Penton explained. "You gave me two packs of cards to look at and you told me at the same time that one of them had been substituted for a pack supplied in the smoking-room of the Dormy House at Sandchester. Now, are you quite sure that that was so?"

"As sure as I can be of anything. You know all about that young fool Andrew Canton and the rubbers of bridge in the Dormy House, where he lost some hundreds of pounds to those two shady Americans. Well, I racked my brains for a long time to discover how the swindle was worked. And when the solution came to me, I could have kicked myself for not thinking of it before. There was a thunderstorm going on at the time and it was so dark that the lights had to be switched on. That was all right, and the man Bradman left the room on some pretence or other and I am sure he came back with a pack of cards already arranged in his pocket to replace those already cut for dealing on the table. Then Cleaver remembered a telephone message he had to send and slipped into the

sound-proof box in the corner of the smoking-room, where he monkeyed with the electric fittings and put the lights out. It didn't take James, the steward, who was a handy man, long to make good the damage, and the game was resumed. I felt sure there was something wrong and I puzzled over the matter until I reached the solution I have just given you. That is why I managed to get the cards that had been used from James and brought them to you. And now you can go on."

"Well, I don't mind admitting," Penton said, "that, at first go off, I was as baffled as you were. I could not make out why I could see no signs of whorls on the thumb impress of one of the players. And I should probably be as much in the dark as ever if you hadn't turned up later on with that piece of wax. But when I came to examine that, I discovered, not only a thumb-nail, but certain filaments which could only have been the artificial skin that plastic surgeons make when they are engaged upon work of minor importance. Of course, if it is facial manipulation, then they graft on live skin, but for a missing finger or anything of that kind, there is really no necessity to take the trouble. There is a preparation which does equally well and nobody who wasn't endowed with extraordinary sight could detect the difference. The stuff is a trifle waxy, which would account for the very minute par-

ticles of that material which I found on the back of the cards. I was just a little suspicious from the very first, but I dare say I should have gone on being puzzled indefinitely if you hadn't handed me that flat piece of wax. And then, when I came to put two and two together, I came to the conclusion that the man who was one of the four card players was the possessor of an artificial joint to his thumb and that he lost it in the struggle you had with him in the library at Seagrane Holt on the night of the Earl's death. You tore off his india-rubber glove with so powerful a grip that the artificial thumb-tip came away too and, in the excitement of the moment, you probably trod on it and flattened it out. Perhaps it was the murderer himself who stepped on it, but it doesn't matter in the least. Anyhow, it is a priceless clue and one that is likely to put the rope round the miscreant's neck—that is, provided you can find him."

"Oh, I can find him easily enough," Cheriton cried. "He is still putting up at the Dormy House at Sandchester and is evidently under the impression that he has got clean away without leaving any sort of a clue behind him."

"But what price his missing joint?"

"Oh yes, there is that. Still, he can easily hide his hand in a glove and say he has had a sprain or something of that sort. Then he could probably find some plastic surgeon who

would do it for him and naturally say nothing about it, because doctors don't discuss their patients, even professionally. And, by Jove, now I come to think of it, Bradman went up to Town very soon after the murder and has been away ever since. He told James the steward that he had been called away on some business connected with his colonial property and that he hoped to get back in the course of a few days. Now, it is pretty long odds that if he was the man with the missing joint, he is in London somewhere having the mischief repaired. I suppose it isn't possible to get in contact with the surgeon who is undertaking the operation? "

"It isn't easy," Penton said with a dry smile. "I admit there are very few plastic surgeons in London, and most of them would be too busy on really paying jobs to take on a little thing like a thumb-joint, but I believe there are assistants who do such things *sub rosa* in their spare time."

"I see what you mean," Cheriton said. "I can quite understand how one of these chaps can so alter a criminal as to place him beyond recognition."

"They could that," Penton agreed. "I know three men in the game who could so change us that even our own mothers wouldn't know us. And, mind you, they can do that either permanently or temporarily. There is a man

in London at the present moment who the police would give their heads to get hold of and yet he is walking about under their very noses, so transformed that he has every appearance of belonging to another nationality than his own. What do you think of that?"

"How did you find that out?" Cheriton asked.

"Ah, my dear boy, now you are asking me to betray professional secrets. And don't forget that you are no longer a member of the Detective Force at Scotland Yard. I do know it, and I hope to put my knowledge to practical use."

"But surely a reputable plastic surgeon——"

"Yes, but they are not all of such high repute. I mean that a good many of them employ assistants who are almost as clever as themselves. These are paid men, whose salaries are not particularly handsome. Now, suppose one of them gets into trouble. Drink or gambling debts or a bit of forgery. How easy it is for them to let some star of the underworld know that they can so disguise him that he can go into a bank and cash a cheque and, an hour or two later, become another man altogether. You see, that sort of thing does away with false beards and moustaches and wigs and places the criminal in another class altogether. See what I mean? It is being done, I assure you."

"The deuce it is," Cheriton said.

"Yes, and on both sides of the Atlantic too."

"So I should imagine," Cheriton observed thoughtfully. "It is pretty plain that Bradman—it must be Bradman because he was the one who had to go to London after the murder on 'business'—had his operation in the States, because I can practically identify him with a particularly poisonous scoundrel known to the underworld as 'Thumbscrew Jake.' This man has many names under which he works, but the one I gave you is the one that sticks because he really has lost the top joint of his right thumb and at one period of his career was proud of it. Sort of thug. But now that he has climbed high in his profession the loss and the nickname had to be washed out, hence the plastic surgery. Now if I can lay my hand on that man I have Lord Seagrane's murderer."

"Then you think that he shed his sinister nickname and got that artificial top joint in the States before he came here?"

"That's my idea," Cheriton responded. "Then, for some unholy reason or another, he decided to visit this country in company with the other scoundrel Cleaver. Mind you, they both knew all about Seagrane and his past, particularly the way in which he made his fortune, to say nothing of his partner Major Canton,

who was shot in a gambling brawl. Of course they came over to rob Seagrane on a grand scale. He may or may not have recognized them; but if he did, he said nothing, and he was the last man in the world to stand anything that savoured of blackmail. I would give a whole lot to know what they were after the night they burgled the library. It wasn't money or securities or anything of that sort, because nothing was missing. But they didn't visit Seagrane Holt for nothing. Nor did they stage that cunning alibi for amusement. Did I tell you about that?"

"I don't think so," Penton said.

Cheriton went on to explain the story of the sudden attack of illness and how the services of James, the steward, had been secured to obtain brandy for the sufferer.

" Sounds all right, doesn't it?" he concluded. "But James never *saw* the sufferer—only heard his groans and the talks between the two men which might have only been *one* man talking and imitating the other's tone. All the time Bradman might have been in the library at Holt, which was easy, as the Dormy House is an old one and exit and entry to the bedroom occupied by those two could have been easily managed with a length of rope. But all this is waste of time. By now Bradman has a new thumb-joint. Is it possible to get in touch with the surgeon who made it?"

"A vital point, that," Penton agreed smilingly.

"The whole point," Cheriton cried emphatically. "If you can do that, the problem is solved."

"Then it is solved," Penton said. "I am going to take you to call on the man who made it."

CHAPTER XXVI

CHERITON'S eyes lighted up expectantly.

"Do you mean to say," he said, when he got over his first feeling of astonishment, "that you are taking me to see the man who can put me on the track of——"

"Well, I didn't quite say that. It is pretty obvious to me, from what you have just said, that, whoever Lord Seagrane's murderer was, he must have lost the first joint of his right-hand thumb. And, that being so, he would see the danger of not having the damage repaired without loss of time. Of course, he has not the slightest idea that you held the clue and that the piece of wax you gave me is going to be an important exhibit in the case. But I am going to take you to see a man named Harness, who is more than suspected of illicit operations, face-lifting and all that sort of thing, where certain criminals are concerned. You can see the importance of this to a man who wants an absolutely cast-iron disguise."

"I should think I could," Cheriton said. "If you could transform a wanted burglar into a respectable citizen or a bank forger into a Spanish nobleman, then you are going to give

Scotland Yard something quite new to think about."

"Scotland Yard is thinking about it already," Penton said dryly. "They have had more than one case lately that has entirely baffled them. And I shrewdly suspect Harness is the genius who is causing all the trouble. However, that matter can stand over for the present. Come along with me and see what we can do."

"You mean call upon the man himself?"

"That's the idea. But it is not going to be easy. Harness is a very brilliant man and did some fine service in the War. As a matter of fact, we were at Oxford together and also received our training at the same hospital. During the War, and after for some time, Harness was the right-hand man of Fergus McAlpine, who, as you probably know, is the finest manipulative and plastic surgeon living to-day. And Harness would have gone to the top of the tree himself only, unfortunately, he cannot keep off the drink. He is one of those chaps who can keep sober for weeks or months and then start an orgy lasting for weeks. The very worst type of drunkard. Besides, he is a drug addict. Of course, McAlpine had to get rid of him and, since then, he has got a living as best he can. We can't actually prove that he is in touch with the criminal classes, but we very shrewdly suspect it, so you will see that we are not going to have it all our own way."

Once in the street, Penton hailed a taxi and gave the driver certain directions which led, presently, to one of those mean narrow streets in North Battersea which is given over mainly to tenants occupying a single room with, here and there, a sort of lodging-house. Before one of these, Penton paused and instructed the taxi-driver to wait. In response to his knock on a door which had not received a coat of paint for years, a queer little atom of a servant appeared. She was thin and stunted and might have been any age between fifteen and thirty, for, though her body was obviously ill nourished, her face had all the pert, audacious expression peculiar to the born Londoner of a certain class. When Penton asked a question, she shook her head.

"I don't understand you," Penton said.
"Mr. Harness lives here. He has been here for some time."

"No, 'e don't," the child-woman responded in a high falsetto. "'E bin gone from 'ere the best part of a week."

"Have you any idea where he is at present?"
"Can't say," came the reply. "When Mr. 'Arness went away, 'e didn't leave no address."

Penton smiled as he put his hand in his trousers pocket and produced four shining half-crowns. These he displayed temptingly on his hand before the little servant, who regarded them gloatingly as if she had never seen so much money in her life before, which was probably the case.

"Like to have these?" Penton asked casually.

"Not 'arf," came a hoarse whisper.

"Very well, then; they are yours if you will only tell me where I can find Mr. Harness."

"14, Epsom Place, Gower Street," the response came in a whisper, after which the front door closed rapidly.

"Good enough," Penton said, as he gave the taxi-man fresh directions. "It is evident that our friend Harness has had a stroke of luck. He only stays in a filthy hole like that when he is at the end of his resources."

The address in Gower Street was a distinct improvement on the first one and it was in the comparatively luxurious sitting-room that Penton ran his quarry to earth. A tall, thin man with a face white and drawn and eyes that watered under twitching lids rose to his feet and angrily demanded to know the meaning of this unexpected intrusion. It was evident from his manner that he was not entirely sober, as witness a half-empty whisky bottle and siphon at a table at his elbow.

"Come, come, Harness," Penton said. "It is no use to treat me as if I was an entire stranger."

"Who is the other fellow?" Harness asked sulkily.

Penton made the necessary introduction and then flung himself into a chair, as if to intimate

that the interview was likely to be a more or less lengthy one.

"And what does your friend want with me?" Harness demanded.

"We will come to that presently," Penton said. "Now, look here, Harness, we used to be very good friends in the old days, and I want to do my best for you now. I called to see you in Battersea, but found that you had left. My dear fellow, I can speak quite freely before my friend Cheriton and I propose to do so. He is interested in plastic surgery, not for himself but in connection with a friend of his."

"Well, Harness growled. "Well? What's the game?"

"Very comfortable quarters, these," Penton said, apropos of nothing. "Much better than that dreadful hole where you have been existing for the last few weeks. I suppose you have had a big stroke of luck lately."

"What the devil has that got to do with you?"

"I think it will pay you to listen civilly to what I have to say," Penton responded. "Now listen. I can see you are only half sober, but you are sane enough to be able to understand that you are in extreme danger."

"Oh, I am, am I?" Harness sneered.

"Yes, indeed you are. I suppose you heard all about the famous Consolidated Bank forgery? Yes, I see you did. Now, the police are looking for Miles Fenton, who is the moving

spirit in that affair and, sooner or later, they will lay their hands upon him. It won't be the first time he has been in jail, so you will understand how it comes about that his finger-prints are recorded at Scotland Yard. By a strange combination of circumstances, the authorities managed to get the finger-prints of another man who doesn't resemble Fenton in the least and those two sets of finger-prints are identical. I suppose a coincidence like that would never strike a plastic surgeon who is helping a criminal to escape justice."

Harness was sitting up now and following what Penton had to say with breathless attention.

"No," he breathed heavily. "That is just where a slip might come about. Am I to understand that the second man you speak of has been arrested?"

"Not yet, but he is being most carefully watched and the police can have him at any moment they wish. They are perfectly sure that the second man, if I may use the expression, is Fenton himself, perfectly disguised after he went through the hands of a plastic surgeon who shall be nameless."

"Go on," Harness said hoarsely. "Go on."

"Is there any reason to say any more?" Penton retorted. "If the police theory is right and they can identify the new man with the old one, so to speak, then it is going to be rather

hard for the plastic surgeon who undertook the operation. Of course, you need not say anything unless you like ; but if you are wise and elect to be candid with me, then I think I can save you from—well—a criminal conviction. Accessory after the fact, and all that sort of thing.”

Harness surrendered unconditionally.

“ You are not a bad sort, Penton,” he murmured. “ Never were. Always ready to do a good turn to anybody. But why didn’t you come alone to tell me this ? ”

“ Ah, that I am not at liberty to say,” Penton said. “ My friend Mr. Cheriton is not here out of idle curiosity. And now to come to the point. Have you, or have you not, had a patient under your hands lately who happens to be suffering from the loss of the top joint of his right thumb ? ”

“ I have,” Harness confessed. “ A chap who came to me saying that he had heard of me from a friend in New York and asked me to turn him out a new top joint for his right thumb, which he had lost in some accident. Mind you, he is not a bit of the criminal type. Rather more like a learned professor of sorts. But he was very worried about the loss of his thumb-joint and wanted it replaced without further delay. Kind of vanity, I should call it. You know how often people are sensitive about these things.”

“ Interrupting you for a moment,” Cheriton

said. "Perhaps you wouldn't mind describing your patient."

"Not at all," Harness said. "I should say he was about sixty, perhaps a little more. Would be tall, but for a peculiar malformation of the shoulders which gave him the appearance of a man with a hump. Grey hair and moustache."

"That doesn't sound a bit like the man I am looking for," Cheriton said. "Is that your only patient recently?"

"The only bit of luck I have had in three months," Harness said frankly. "The man came to me in Battersea and offered me a hundred pounds down if I could guarantee to make the injury good. I had no hesitation in taking it, and the first thing I did when that money came into my possession was to leave Battersea and occupy these rooms here. It was here that the work was done, more or less to the satisfaction of my patient. Mind you, I am to have a second hundred when the last stage is completed. I am not altogether satisfied and I don't think I shall earn that second hundred unless I can put a few finishing touches to the missing joint. So, for the last day or two, my patient—whose name I don't know and never asked—comes here every day, or rather every night, and I suppose he will until we are both absolutely satisfied that the work cannot be better."

"Then you expect him here to-day?" Cheriton asked.

"I expect him here to-night," Harness corrected. "At about eight o'clock. Sometimes an hour later."

"Yes, I quite understand," Cheriton said. "He prefers to come after dusk. But it doesn't sound a bit like the individual I am interested in. That is unless his grey moustache and hair happen to be false."

Harness was emphatic on the point.

"Not a bit of it," he cried. "You can't deceive me in matters of that sort. The moustache is genuine enough. If you saw the man tugging it sometimes in moments of thoughtfulness you couldn't doubt it. And there are other signs that I need not go into. You have made a mistake evidently."

"I am not so sure of that," Penton said. "I can supply you with a dye or a bleach that will take all the colour out of hair for at least twenty-four hours. Then the natural hue reasserts itself. A dozen chemical solutions will temporarily make a black moustache into a white one."

Cheriton listened to this statement with considerable relief, for he was beginning to feel that Bradman had found some other source from which the damage might be repaired. But after what Penton had just said, he resolved to go through with this adventure to the finish.

At any rate, he could hang about Gower Street after nine that evening and follow the mysterious stranger to the place where he lived.

"I don't think we need detain you any longer," Penton said at length. "If we have made a mistake, we have, and there is an end of it. And, as to you, Harness, if you are wise, you will take my warning to heart. Otherwise, before long you are going to find yourself standing in the dock."

A few minutes later, and the two investigators were standing outside on the pavement together.

"Now, what is the next move?" Penton asked. "I am not exactly a detective, you know, my side of criminal investigation lying in a different direction altogether. You heard what I said just now about those bleachings. Well, I wasn't bluffing. It doesn't sound as if you are on the track of the right man, though both of these chaps, if there are two, seem to be minus the top joint of their right thumb. Yet, when you come to think of it, there is nothing particularly strange in that, because the right thumb is about the most useful digit that a man possesses. If he is working with tools or machinery and a hand gets caught in a cog-wheel, or anything of that kind, it is generally the thumb of the right hand that suffers first. Still, if I were you, I shouldn't abandon the search."

"I am not going to," Cheriton said curtly.

"I am going to hang about here this evening and follow that man wherever he goes. I shall hire a taxi by the hour and have it standing by the pavement with the engine running. And when I have satisfied myself that the grey-haired man has reached his home or his hotel, or wherever he is putting up, then I think I know what is to be done next. There is a good deal in what you say about coincidences, but I am not satisfied that this is one of them. And don't forget that in the last few days Bradman has been up in Town on what he is pleased to call important business. And now let us go off together somewhere and have a meal."

It was shortly after nine o'clock the same evening when Cheriton's taxi pulled up outside a house in Gower Street, not far from the place where Harness had taken up his quarters. And there he sat well back in the cab, patiently waiting developments. The best part of an hour passed and it was beginning to grow dark when along the pavement on the opposite side of the road Cheriton spotted a figure of a tall man with a stoop in his shoulder who came strolling along and paused now and again as if not altogether certain as to which house in that very long street he wanted. Outwardly, at any rate, there was absolutely no resemblance between him and Bradman. There was the scholarly stoop and the hump between the shoulders that Harness had mentioned. Under

his soft hat, Cheriton could see a straggly mass of grey hair and, on the upper lip, a thick moustache of the same hue. This was undoubtedly the man that he wanted to see, and Cheriton was doubly assured when he noticed the stranger knock on the door of the house where Harness was lodging and finally disappear into the hall. So far, everything had gone smoothly and the rest appeared to be a matter of time.

Cheriton turned from his corner seat on to the pavement and spoke a few words to the driver.

"Listen," he said. "This may or may not be a long job. You saw that man with the grey hair come down the street and go into a house close by."

"I did that, sir," the cabman grinned.

"Very well, then. He may be there a few minutes, or he may be there an hour, and when he comes out, you are to follow and not lose sight of him. I may have to pull you up presently and leave the cab to follow him. If I do, then you just wait till I come back. Now, here is a pound note to go on with. I merely give you this as an earnest of my good intentions."

"All right, guv'nor," the man said cheerfully. "I knows a gentleman when I sees one. Wot's more, I've been on this game afore. Blime, if I hadn't been a chauffeur, I'd like to 'ave bin a detective. And if you like to regard me as your assistant in this matter, I shall be flattered."

It was a fairly weary wait, but the man with the grey hair emerged from the house presently and walked down the road without looking either to right or left and evidently quite easy in his mind as to his movements being observed. Behind him the taxi moved slowly, and then, rather to Cheriton's surprise, the quarry turned into the public baths in a turning off Endell Street and disappeared through the open portals.

"Municipal baths, guv'nor," the cabby explained. "I often goes there and has a dip myself. Not a swimming bath, but kind o' cabins, first, second and third class."

"Thanks for the information," Cheriton said.
"You wait here while I go inside."

With that, he dived into the rather ill-lighted hall of the public baths and stood there watching the tall grey man taking his ticket through the hole in the box office which was not unlike that familiar to railway stations. Almost before the man had taken his ticket and walked unconcernedly on, Cheriton presented himself to the collector of customs and asked for a ticket in his turn. He was just in time to see the grey man disappear into one of the cabins, so he selected one for himself on the other side of the corridor and closed the door behind him. It looked like a long and weary wait, but Cheriton was quite prepared for that. He was glad to note that the door of the cabin had in it five holes in diamond pattern, probably made for ventila-

tion, and through these he could see something of what was taking place in the cabin of his opposite number. Nor had he long to wait for the developments that followed. If there had only been a little more light it would have been better; as it was it would not be easy to identify the quarry if—as Cheriton expected—the man opposite made any drastic changes in his personal appearance.

A quarter of an hour later the man on the other side of the corridor bustled out carrying the suit-case with which he had been provided when Cheriton had first caught sight of him in Gower Street and which Cheriton had hardly noticed at the time. But he grasped the significance of it now right enough. In that suit-case was the change of clothing which had been effected in the privacy of the bath cabin. A very neat idea, Cheriton thought.

But it was more than a change of clothes, it was a different man entirely. He came almost charging out of the cabin and was away down the corridor so rapidly that Cheriton had no more than a cinematic photograph of the quarry. Nothing like what he wanted in the way of identification.

There was nothing left for it but to follow swiftly. Outside the grey man had hailed a passing taxi and was whirled away with Cheriton's cab in close pursuit. In the course of time the first cab stopped before the Acropolis

Hotel and the once grey man got out and paid off his driver. Almost before he had passed the entrance porch, Cheriton was after him. But he had to hold back a little, for the last thing he wanted was to be recognized as a sleuth on the track of a suspect.

It was well past ten o'clock now and the lounge was almost deserted. In one corner was the clerk's office and opposite it the luggage and passenger lifts to the upper stories. The liftman of the latter elevator was still on duty and it was he who came forward and saluted as the grey man said something to him which Cheriton, lurking in the shadow, could not catch. Then the lift gate was flung open and the grey man entered and, a moment later, was being whirled up to the higher floors.

One thing seemed to be established, at any rate. The grey man was stopping here, if only for the night. Perhaps he had been a resident for some days. Cheriton decided that he must find out.

A small boy in buttons was yawning in the lounge, evidently waiting for relief. To him Cheriton showed a pound note.

" You saw the gentleman who just went up in the lift," he said. " I want to know his name and how long he has been here."

The lad held out his hand with a grin.

" Been staying 'ere for a week, sir," he said.
" Comes from Orstralia. Name of Bradman."

CHAPTER XXVII

CHERITON turned away from the hotel into which he had tracked Bradman down and established his identity beyond the shadow of a doubt. Just for a moment he was inclined to marvel at the audacity of the man who, after successfully concealing his tracks from the surgeon Harness, had been reckless enough to put up at a big London hotel in his proper name.

But, after all, that line of policy might be a safe one when, and if, inquiries came to be made, as they undoubtedly would. He, Bradman, would assert that he had nothing to conceal and, therefore, why should he endeavour to hide his identity?

Cheriton climbed thoughtfully into his taxi and gave the driver orders to take him to Penton's rooms and there paid him.

"Hope it's been orlright, sir," the taxi-man said as Cheriton handed him another note. "Thank you, sir. This is the best night's work I have done in a month o' Sundays."

Penton listened with the deepest interest to all that Cheriton had to say.

"That is precisely what I told you," he said.

"There are a dozen chemical solutions by which a man can change the colour of his hair and, moreover, he can make the alteration permanent or not as he pleases."

"So it seems," Cheriton smiled. "That is rather an ingenious idea of Bradman's to select a private bath in a public washing place late in the evening when so few people are about. He could come and go without observation, and it is long odds that no attendant would be able to say that the hump-backed old gentleman who went into his private cabin with grey hair and moustache came out of it again looking twenty years younger and with the hair on his upper lip as black as ink. I presume Bradman changed his clothes in the secrecy of the cabin and spent the quarter of an hour or so that he was in there in washing his head and moustache in some cleansing solution. Then he could walk out, an entirely different man."

"That is the idea," Penton agreed. "Now, what are you going to do next?"

"Ah, that depends to a certain extent on Inspector Merrick," Cheriton remarked. "After all, it is his case, not mine. But I don't mind admitting to you that I shall take a sort of impish delight in showing my late chief how entirely wrong he has been in his investigations. I can't arrest Bradman, though there is no lingering doubt in my mind now as to his being the actual murderer of my poor friend

Seagrane. But why that crime was committed and what those two were after is still as much a puzzle to me as ever it was. Perhaps that will come out later on. I shall go back to Seagrane Holt to-morrow and put Merrick wise as to my discovery. Of course, I should not have been able to move a yard without your assistance. But that is no reason why I should tell Merrick so."

Accordingly, the following morning, Cheriton made his way back to Sandchester with a view of seeing Merrick and putting him on the right track. But, for the time being, the Inspector seemed to have vanished and all that Cheriton could find out at the village inn where he was staying was that he had gone off for the day and was not expected back till next morning. There was, therefore, nothing to do but to wait, and Cheriton put in the next two or three hours working in his cottage.

It was after lunch that he had the opportunity of seeing Evelyn alone. He found her almost as much distressed as she had been before he set out on his journey to London.

"Is there any fresh trouble?" he asked.

"Oh, it seems to be nothing but trouble," Evelyn said. "I don't know what to think, Clifford. The most extraordinary change has come over Andrew Canton. He is looking dreadfully ill, and every time somebody calls or there is a stranger about, he is on the verge of

collapse. I am sure he is worried to death by some secret trouble. And when I ask him what is wrong, he merely shakes his head and denies that he has anything particular on his mind. Can't you see him and ask if you can do anything? And, Clifford, do you honestly think that he had anything to do with the death of my dear old benefactor?"

"I am absolutely certain that he had not," Cheriton said emphatically. "He is as innocent of that crime as you are. Of course, he behaved exceedingly badly over the stealing of that picture and it was foolish of him to pretend that he went to Sandwich when he was in London. But then, he was at his wits' ends to pay the money to these card-sharpers at the Dormy House. He dared not go to Lord Seagrane for money after what had happened, so he acted the part of the common thief. But I can tell you this. Within the next few hours, the actual murderer of Lord Seagrane will be in the hands of the police and Canton will have nothing more to worry about. However, I will see him if you like and try and ascertain what is on his mind."

Later on in the afternoon, Cheriton encountered Canton on his way back from the golf links. It was somewhere near the cottage and, at Cheriton's invitation, Canton came with anything but a good grace into the sitting-room.

"Well," he asked sulkily, "what is it?"

"I wouldn't adopt that tone if I were you," Cheriton said. "You will gain nothing by it. Sit down and smoke a cigarette and listen to what I have to say. And if you are wise and don't want to find yourself, even temporarily, in a prison cell, you will be perfectly candid with me."

"Well," Canton muttered. "Resume."

"You are not very encouraging," Cheriton said. "Anyway, it's like this. For the last day or two, I have been following up a certain line of investigation of my own and I have made one or two startling discoveries. At least, a friend of mine has made them for me, which comes to much the same thing. Before many hours are gone, Lord Seagrane's murderer will be in the hands of the law. Does that make things easier for you?"

The cloud on Canton's brow did not lift.

"Well, that is something, at any rate," he muttered. "That fool of an Inspector is under the impression that I had a hand in it. He was asking me questions yesterday afternoon that lasted for three hours. And when he had finished, he gave me a nasty hint to the effect that it would be as well if I stayed where I was, otherwise he might have to take certain steps."

"In other words, arrest you, I suppose?"

"Well, that is the impression he conveyed, and, I believe, intended to convey. I swear to you, Cheriton——"

"There is no occasion," Cheriton said coldly. "I know perfectly well that you are innocent on that charge. I hope you were quite candid with Merrick and followed my advice as to your movements in London on the night of the Earl's death."

"I have got to thank you for that, at any rate," Canton said grudgingly. "I did tell Merrick that I was in London and not in Sandwich and I made no attempt to conceal from him the fact that I raised money on the Holbein. I told him the name of the man who advanced the cash and he asked no further questions about that because he could verify the facts. But what he has got in the back of his mind is that there had been more than one quarrel between Seagrange and myself and that the old man had either altered his will or was about to do so. You see, he had been nosing around amongst the servants and wormed all sorts of information from them. And, as a rule, servants know a good deal more about their master's affairs than we give them credit for. Anyhow, Merrick is under the impression that I should have benefited by the Earl's death, he believing that I am next of kin or heir or something of that sort. He will know better presently. But, in the meantime he seems to think that I managed to get back from London late that night and crept into the house after the family had gone to bed. Of course I could

have done all that, but the fact remains that I didn't."

"I know you didn't. That is not the point I want to get at. Within a few hours, Merrick will know that he has been entirely wrong, and his professional interest in you will go. But knowing you are innocent of that dastardly crime, what is troubling you? I have been talking to Evelyn and she says that you are in such a nervous condition that you are on the verge of a breakdown. Why don't you take me into your confidence? I want to help you if I can, and yet you are putting every obstacle in the way."

"How do I know that you want to help me?" Canton retorted. "How can you possibly be a friend of mine? To begin with, you never liked me and, more than that, you have come between me and the girl I hoped to marry."

"I don't think there is any occasion to drag Miss Marchand's name into this. But, since you have done so, it is just as well that I should speak plainly. You never wanted to marry her. You would never have thought of her at all if it hadn't been for Lord Seagrane, who more or less insisted on it. And don't forget that Miss Marchand and myself were friends long before she ever heard of you. I am going to marry her."

"Oh, you are, are you?" Canton sneered. "Does she happen to be aware of the fact?"

It was with some difficulty that Cheriton managed to control his temper.

"That we need not go into," he said. "Of course, you can refuse to confide in me, but I shall find out whether you put obstacles in my way or not. The main mystery is solved, but there are side issues, and I am sure that one of them concerns you. Are you being blackmailed?"

Canton stared at the speaker in astonishment. There was fear written in his eyes and a certain agitation and emotion that told a significant tale.

"How on earth did you guess that?" he asked.

"Not very difficult, I think. You have been in close contact with two of the greatest scoundrels in the world for some little time past and a mere tool in their hands. Now, let me tell you this. You thought that afternoon in the Dormy House when you lost so much money to Bradman and Cleaver that everything was fair and above-board. But it wasn't. You were deliberately swindled by a cunning scheme which those two rascals had carefully worked out. It was so beautifully done that, for a long time, I was deceived myself."

"And you expect me to believe that?"

"My dear Canton, I am going to prove it."

With that, Cheriton went on to describe, at some length, what had taken place in the

Dormy House and how the swindle had been worked. He could see that the disclosure made a deep impression on Canton, because the latter had abandoned his truculent mood and was listening with wide-open eyes.

"Well, I suppose I ought to beg your pardon," Canton said. "I can see now that you're quite right."

"Of course I am right, and I dare say I should be still further right if I said that you had lost still further money to those ruffians. For the life of you, you can't see the slightest chance of discharging your debt."

Canton more or less surrendered at discretion.

"That is right enough in a way," he confessed.

"Only I didn't lose money to the both of them, because Bradman has been away in London for some days. But I have had a few games at écarté with Cleaver and—er—and—er—"

"Lost, of course," Cheriton said swiftly. "In one word, how much more have you fooled away?"

"Two or three hundred," Canton said miserably. "I thought I should get it back again. You see, I rather fancy myself at écarté, and as Cleaver confessed to be a poor player—"

"Poor player!" Cheriton echoed scornfully. "If I am correct in my surmise, Bradman and Cleaver are two of the most cunning card-sharpers in the world. A sorry ass like you would not have the slightest chance with them."

All the same, I don't believe it is the further debt you can't pay that is worrying you. It's worse than that."

" You're a clever devil," Canton said admiringly. " And you are right. I had better tell you all about it. It will be a relief to get it off my mind."

" Go on," Cheriton said encouragingly. " And if I can do anything to help you, I will do so cheerfully."

" Well, it's like this," Canton said, speaking naturally and easily for the first time. " As I told you just now, I was out to see if I could get my money back and—well—I didn't. And then Cleaver began to throw out strange hints. Mind you, I am dealing entirely with Cleaver now, because I haven't seen Bradman for some days. I was rather astonished to find out that Cleaver knew exactly how things stood at Seagrane Holt. He knew that Lord Seagrane's will was missing and that, unless it could be found, my position as regards succession to the estates was not worth a threepenny-bit. I told him that I was afraid that Lord Seagrane had destroyed his will and that he would have made another if he hadn't been murdered, and when Cleaver heard this he smiled significantly. And then he went on with those hints of his. He taunted me with the fact that I had incurred a further debt I could never hope to pay and that if he reported to my clubs that I was a defaulter

over card debts, I should have to resign, which meant social disgrace. Oh, he's a cunning devil is Cleaver. He taunted me with the fact that I couldn't pay what I owed, and unless the money was forthcoming, I should find myself in a very tight place. Of course, I could see that for myself. And then he took another line altogether. Supposing, he said, he could show me a way to make a huge fortune. Suppose he could put in my hands certain information and certain documents which would mean something like a million to me, what was I prepared to pay him? Would it be worth £100,000? Would I sign a paper to that effect? All that sort of thing."

"I hope to goodness you didn't," Cheriton said.

"Oh, my dear chap, nothing has been settled up to the present. Cleaver said that I should have time to think it over. I am so bewildered that I don't know whether I am standing on my head or my heels. Here am I, practically a pauper, and yet offered a huge fortune if I am prepared to hand over a big sum of money for the information which will enable me to claim my inheritance. I am not altogether a fool, Cheriton, though I know you think I am. Of course, if it was all straightforward dealing, no man situated as I am would hesitate for a moment. But I am absolutely certain that it is not straightforward dealing. If I do what

those men want me to, I shall find, later on, that I am entirely in their hands and I suspect it will be a case of blackmail for years to come. And after what you have told me, I am absolutely certain of it. What am I to do?"

"Leave yourself entirely in my hands," Cheriton advised. "I am very glad you told me this, because it throws a flood of light upon a mystery which is intimately connected with Lord Seagrane's death. Never mind for the moment what that mystery is, but when you see Cleaver again, pretend to agree, or at any rate, say that you have not yet fully made up your mind. And you can be assured that everything is going to be all right."

No sooner had Canton departed than Cheriton went off with the object of getting in contact with Inspector Merrick. But for that he had to wait till the following morning, when he looked up his late chief in the inn, where Merrick was just finishing his breakfast. Merrick greeted him patronizingly.

"Well, my young friend," he said. "How are things going with you? Solved the problem yet?"

"You have forgotten that I am no longer a member of the Scotland Yard Detective Force," Cheriton smiled. "From your point of view, I have always been a sort of an amateur. But even amateurs succeed sometimes where professionals fail."

"Meaning to say you have found something, I suppose?"

"Well, I think so," Cheriton said with some sort of hesitation. "However, I would like to hear what you have to say, first."

"There isn't very much to tell," Merrick said complacently. "To a man of my experience, the conclusions point only in one direction. And that you can guess."

"Meaning Mr. Andrew Canton, I suppose?"

"Well?" Merrick asked contemptuously. "Now, mind you, I have had that young man under observation for some time. It struck me as rather significant that he should be away from Seagrane Holt on the night of the Earl's death, especially as those two have been quarrelling very much of late. That I learnt from the servants. I gather that the young man has been going the pace and even resorting to money-lenders, a fact that the old gentleman very strongly resented."

Cheriton nodded approvingly. He knew that Merrick was on the wrong track altogether, but he could not but admire the patience with which he had elicited all this information to the detriment of Andrew Canton.

"I see," Cheriton said thoughtfully. "But I don't regard that as being quite conclusive."

"Nor should I," Merrick agreed. "But there is more than that. To begin with, young Canton has told endless lies as to his movements

for some hours before the murder and afterwards. You may be surprised to hear that he didn't go to Sandwich at all. When he set off in the two-seater, he went direct to London and there he proceeded to pawn a picture he had stolen from Seagrane Holt for enough money to pay his debts which he incurred card-playing with two colonial gentlemen golfers who were staying at the Dormy House at Sandchester."

"Are you quite sure they are gentlemen?" Cheriton asked. "My information leads me to believe that they are two very shady characters, not colonial at all, but Americans. And, incidentally, card-sharpers in the first flight. It would have been just as well, perhaps, if you had inquired into their antecedents. I can assure you they are worth it."

"But why the deuce should I?" Merrick demanded. "What have they got to do with the death of the Earl?"

"What indeed?" Cheriton asked dryly. "I am merely giving you a bit of information. Meanwhile, I am interrupting you in your story."

"Well, it's like this," Merrick resumed. "That young man had to confess to me, when I came to put him through it, that the Sandwich story was all lies. He also made a clean breast of the picture business. And he didn't make much attempt to conceal the fact that he and the old gentleman had been on pretty bad

terms recently, in consequence of his carryings-on. Also, he would not have been surprised to hear that Lord Seagrane had destroyed his will or, alternately, had made a codicil to it which left the property elsewhere. So, you see, here is a man who would naturally benefit by the death of his benefactor."

"Wait a bit," Cheriton said. "You have been strangely misinformed. Canton is no relation whatever to the late Earl, and if no will is forthcoming, the property and the settled income thereon reverts to the State, there being no male heirs."

Merrick's jaw dropped. It was as if he had been struck a blow in the face. Cheriton restrained a smile.

"Is that really so?" Merrick asked blankly.

"Absolutely," Cheriton grinned. "Even the greatest of us make mistakes sometimes. As a matter of fact, it was entirely to Canton's interest that the Earl should live."

"Yes, I suppose that is so," Merrick grudgingly admitted. "Now I begin to see why that young man was so frank with me. And apparently putting a rope round his neck at the same time."

Cheriton could have put another construction on Canton's frank admissions, but wisely refrained from doing so. He was still chuckling to himself when he saw through the window of Merrick's sitting-room, the figure of

Bradman in a car in which he had obviously just come down from London. He turned to Merrick.

"Would you like to arrest the murderer of Lord Seagrane within the next hour?" he asked. "If so, I will do the needful."

Merrick jumped to his feet excitedly.

"Lead me to him," he cried. "But there, I don't believe you can do anything of the sort. You amateurs . . . "

CHAPTER XXVIII

CHERITON did not stop to argue the point. "That's your man," he said. "The wealthy gentleman in the car on his way back to the Dormy House after his visit to London on business. The murderer of Lord Seagrane."

For once Merrick forgot his grievance regarding the importation of amateurs and gentlemen inside the sacred precincts of Scotland Yard. He stared at Cheriton with something like admiration in his eyes. But still cynical.

"Go on," he said. "Let's have the story. But it will have to be a convincing one before I move."

"I am going to prove my statement beyond the shadow of a doubt, Merrick," Cheriton replied. "Now listen carefully."

Very briefly, but cogently, Cheriton related all the circumstances, from the finding of the wax disc to the discovery of the identity of the grey-haired man with Bradman. When he had finished it was plain that Merrick was converted. He jumped excitedly to his feet and suggested action at once.

"I don't think I should, if I were you," Cheriton said. "Bradman has ceased to be a

gunman now, but it is long odds that he carries a weapon of some sort. My idea is that you should telephone to Faversham for one or two plain-clothes men, and take those two on the links this afternoon when they are playing their round. To this I am sure you will agree."

"Quite right," Merrick said.

It was later on in the afternoon when Bradman and his companion were out on the course, that they came in contact with three or four strangers who appeared to be innocently converging from different quarters. And then, as Bradman moved on to the next tee, after holing-out his putt, Merrick stepped up behind him and laid a hand on his shoulder. Before Bradman could realize what had happened, his two arms were twisted behind him and the handcuffs snapped on his wrists.

"What is the meaning of this?" he shouted.

"I shouldn't make a fuss, if I were you," Merrick said. "It would be far better if you and your friend here came quietly. Walt Bradman, alias Thumbscrew Jake, I arrest you on suspicion of having murdered Lord Seagrane, and I am also detaining you, Dan Cleaver, as an accessory after the fact."

"Now, look here," Bradman blustered. "I dare say you think you have got a very fine case, but that remains to be proved. Anyhow, Cleaver has got nothing to do with it."

It seemed to Cheriton that a significant glance

passed between the two men and he had his own good reasons for understanding the meaning of it. Even Merrick hesitated a moment or two, because, from a strictly legal point of view, there was no very strong case against Cleaver and, just for the moment, it might be as well to go easy with Bradman's confederate. As to Bradman himself, he appeared to be utterly unconcerned.

"What are you going to do with me?" he asked.

"I am going to take you to the county jail," Merrick replied. "I have a car waiting for the purpose."

"Going to take me, too?" Cleaver asked.

Merrick indicated that such was his intention.

"Oh, I'll come fast enough," Cleaver said. "I have got nothing to be afraid of, as you will see later on. But you are not going to hike me off like this, without giving me a chance of getting a few things from my bedroom."

"If you take my advice," Cheriton said, "you won't allow him to do anything of the kind. I have a very good reason, which I will explain to you presently, why it should be a great mistake to allow Cleaver out of your sight, even for a few moments. If he wants anything from the bedroom which he is sharing with Bradman, he can easily tell you what it is and the steward can fetch it."

Bradman turned on the speaker with a snarl.

"Very clever, aren't you?" he jeered.
"Think you know everything, don't you?
But if you look for a month——"

He broke off suddenly as he caught Cleaver's eye; then, without a further word being spoken, the two prisoners were hurried off in the custody of the plain-clothes men and Cheriton and Merrick adjourned to the former's cottage, there to talk over the situation.

"Well, I give you best over this business," Merrick said. "You have been right from the first and I have been wrong and I freely admit it. But what particular reason had you for objecting to those two men going to their bedroom? It wouldn't have mattered much what they wanted."

"Ah, there you are entirely wrong," Cheriton smiled. "Unless I am greatly mistaken, we shall find something in that bedroom which will throw a vivid light on the crime. You had better come along with me and start the search at once."

Hour after hour passed in the bedroom of the ancient old Dormy House before Cheriton found what he was looking for. It was discovered, at length, behind a loose panel in the oak surroundings of the room, and when Cheriton held it up to the light, Merrick could read an endorsement on the back of it.

"His late lordship's will," he cried.

"That's it," Cheriton said. "I felt pretty

sure those rascals had got it. Perhaps I had better tell you how I came to get a lead in that particular direction."

Very rapidly, Cheriton went over the conversation he had had with Andrew Canton regarding the offer Cleaver had made him in connection with the £100,000 reward.

"Oh, that was the game, was it?" Merrick exclaimed.

"Precisely," Cheriton replied. "Mind you, I don't believe that Bradman originally went to Seagrane Holt that night with the intention of stealing the old gentleman's will. He was searching for something entirely different. My impression is that he was bitterly disappointed in not finding it. I am sure he didn't find it, because, if he had, we should have discovered it somewhere in this room. I don't suppose we shall ever know what those two scoundrels crossed the Atlantic to get. In any case, it doesn't matter much. Now, I think that, after the safe was burgled and Bradman got over his disappointment in not finding what he was looking for, he put that will in his pocket with a view to making use of it later on. I don't think he meant to kill the Earl, because he wouldn't have done so if Seagrane hadn't attacked him so savagely. But again, we need not go into that for the moment. But, after the Earl was dead and Bradman got away with the will in his pocket, he began to see what a powerful

instrument he had in his hand with which to blackmail Andrew Canton. Canton is a weak sort of creature, and when he found himself face to face with poverty once more, he would almost certainly have listened to the scheme propounded by Cleaver. In other words, he would be only too glad to pay £100,000 for a document which would place him in the possession of a million."

"And you guessed all that, I suppose," Merrick said, "when Canton told you of his interview with Cleaver."

"Quite," Cheriton said. "I should have been a fool if I hadn't. My mind jumped at once to the missing will. I will take this with me if you don't mind and communicate with the family solicitors on the telephone. No doubt, one of the firm will come down to-morrow and advise us. Meanwhile, what is going to happen to those two prisoners of yours?"

"Well, they will be brought before magistrates to-morrow and remanded for a fortnight," Merrick explained. "It will only be a matter of a few minutes and I shan't want any witnesses for some time to come."

As Cheriton had suggested, the particular Prendergast who had the Seagrane estate matters in hand came down to Holt on the following morning, where the missing will was handed over to him.

"Yes," he said. "This is the document that

the late Lord Seagrane showed me and it is undoubtedly in his own handwriting. As I told you before, he asked me to go over it with a view to pointing out any flaws and I informed him that there were none. But that is not all. Have you looked at this?"

"I haven't," Cheriton said. "It is in the envelope in which Lord Seagrane placed it himself and endorsed. I thought it just as well, in the circumstances, not to make any examination for myself, so I locked it up last night so that it might be safe. Surely there is nothing wrong with it."

"You can make your mind easy as to that," Prendergast said with a slight smile as he turned over the paper. "But there is something here besides the will. This sheet of paper attached to the back appears to me to be in the form of a codicil and, moreover, is attested by the two persons who witnessed the will. Um—er—yes, most important."

It was only a matter of a few moments before Prendergast had mastered the contents of the codicil.

"Yes," he said presently. "It puts a different aspect on the affair altogether. Now, Mr. Cheriton, would you be good enough to ask Mrs. Marchand and her daughter to give me a few moments of their time? And, while you are about it, I should like to see Mr. Canton, as well."

A few minutes later, they were all together in the library, with Prendergast standing in the centre with the document impressively displayed in his hand.

"This is the missing will," he said solemnly.

CHAPTER XXIX

"EAR me," Mrs. Marchand said placidly. "I suppose that gets over a great deal of difficulty. Now, wherever did you manage to find it?"

"It is rather a long story," Cheriton explained. "As a matter of fact, I found it myself. For the sake of one person, at least, it is a good thing I did so."

As he said this, Cheriton glanced significantly at Canton, who changed colour. For even he, headstrong and careless as he was, began to see what had been in the back of Cleaver's mind when that infamous proposal was made.

"This is undoubtedly the will that was missing," Prendergast took up the story. "It makes a more than handsome provision for Mr. Canton, together with the estates and the income therefrom. But attached to the will itself is a codicil, witnessed by the butler, Eccles, and his wife, absolutely in order. Perhaps I had better read you the codicil at length. It doesn't run to many lines, but its purpose is perfectly clear. Here it is."

"This is a codicil to my will, dated the first day of May, 192-. I give and bequeath all my

real and personal property of which I die possessed, to my adopted son, Andrew Canton, always excepting the securities mentioned in my will which I left to my relative, Mrs. Marchand, and her daughter, Evelyn. It was my hope at one time that a marriage would take place between the said Andrew Canton and the said Evelyn Marchand, but, of late, I have had reason to doubt the advisability of such a union. Moreover, so far as I am in a position to judge, the said Evelyn Marchand has bestowed her affections elsewhere and in what I deem to be a much more desirable quarter. Therefore, it is my will that if Andrew Canton should marry Evelyn Marchand, then my property, otherwise than previously disposed of, shall revert to the State. I further direct that Seagrane Holt shall be kept up by my trustees in an efficient state of repair and the income thereof handed over to him, provided that in no case does he ever resort to the borrowing of money or of gambling in any shape or form. Should this be the case then the property will revert to the State as aforesaid. And I further direct that my trustees hold the property at their discretion until the said Andrew Canton reaches the age of thirty-five years, so that if by then they deem him to be a worthy person to maintain the dignity of the family, all that I originally intended for him shall be handed over to him absolutely."

"And that is all," Prendergast concluded. "I must apologize to Miss Marchand for reading what may appear to her to be a rather cold-blooded document in her presence, but I think she will understand. Meanwhile, I will leave you people to talk the matter over, whilst I take a walk round the grounds. I have only an hour or two to spare, and shouldn't like to lose this opportunity of renewing my acquaintance with the many beauties of Seagrane Holt."

With that, the lawyer bowed himself diplomatically out, leaving the parties chiefly concerned to discuss this extraordinary turn in the fortunes of them all. It was Andrew Canton, at length, who broke the embarrassing silence.

"I think it is up to me to speak," he said. "But for me, our benefactor might have been alive to-day."

"I don't agree," Cheriton said. "You must not take a morbid view of it like that. Of course, you are not blameless. You caused your benefactor an enormous deal of unnecessary anxiety, hence the codicil to his will. I found that will behind a panel in the bedroom occupied by Bradman and Cleaver. I felt pretty sure it was there, after what you said to me concerning your interview with Cleaver when he attempted to blackmail you. I was convinced that it was through the Earl's will that the scheme was to be worked. By sheer good luck I managed to avert it. But I am

not here to blow my own trumpet. You are a rich man now, Canton, and if you will only take this lesson to heart, you may become a respected member of society yet."

"I mean to," Canton said with more firmness than he had previously displayed. "I have had a lesson I am never likely to forget and I am going to turn over a new leaf altogether. Also, I firmly agree with what the Earl said in the codicil. A man like myself has no right to ask a girl like Evelyn to marry him. It would have been a crime. Besides, I don't believe she ever would have consented."

Evelyn looked up in the speaker's face with a frank expression in her eyes and no heightening of colour in her cheeks.

"I never should, Andrew," she said. "You have many good qualities that I like and I honestly tried to care for you when I saw that the dear old man was so bent upon our marriage. It was a sentimental idea on his part, but one that I was bound to respect. It is a great relief to me to find that the Earl had changed his mind before he died."

"And, incidentally, told the truth," Canton smiled.

Evelyn took a step in Cheriton's direction and placed her hands, with a gesture of confidence, in his.

"Yes," she said simply. "There never was anybody but Clifford. He came into my life

when mother and myself were struggling hard to get a living, and I know that, more than once, he deprived himself of sheer necessities so that we should have a meal. And those are the sort of things that a woman cannot forget. I never expected, in those days, to find myself in a house like this and, for a time, I was, more or less, swept off my feet. But after the day I met Clifford once more in the office of our mutual publishers, then I knew that, sooner or later, I should have to tell the dear old man that his dream could never be realized. I don't think it is necessary to say any more."

The meeting broke up presently and, after Prendergast had been seen off in his car, Cheriton went to his cottage, there to try and do a little work and forget, for the time being, all the exciting events of the last day or two. Inside the front door, on the floor, lay a letter which the postman had delivered in his absence. The writing was not familiar, but the flap of the envelope bore the address of the Grand Park Hotel. Inside it was a letter from Nance Carey.

"DEAR MR. CHERITON (it ran),—

"Just a brief line or two before I return to America. I know that I was not as candid with you the last time we met as I should have been, and I also know that you were perfectly aware of the fact. When you went away, it

didn't require very much sense to realize that you were on the track of that dreadful husband of mine and that, before very long, he would be arrested for the murder of Lord Seagrane. Probably by this time the dread event has happened. Honestly, I think that is the best end for the man at whose hands I have suffered so much.

" But I am concerned with one thing, and one thing only. That dear child of mine must never know that she is the daughter of a man who met his death on the scaffold. She has never heard the name of Bradman, for that is not the name in which I was married. What Bradman's real name was is a secret I mean to keep to myself. What I want you to do, if possible, is to persuade the authorities not to bring prominently before the public the name of 'Thumbscrew Jake.' If you can do that, I shall go to America comparatively happy and thank you from the bottom of my heart. I am sorry I shall not be able to see you again, but I am returning home the day after to-morrow.

" Yours very sincerely,
" NANCE CAREY."

Cheriton read the letter thoughtfully and, at the first opportunity, showed it to Merrick. This was two days later, when Merrick had come back to Sandchester, after his prisoners were remanded in the county jail.

"There you are," Cheriton said. "I told you all about Miss Carey and how I came in contact with her in the course of my investigations and how, indirectly, she helped me. So now I want you to help her over this 'Thumb-screw Jake' side of the business. You ought to do so even out of sheer gratitude."

"So I will," Merrick agreed heartily. "The case is so strong that I can whittle down the details. But we shall never hang Cleaver. It's the one regret I have."